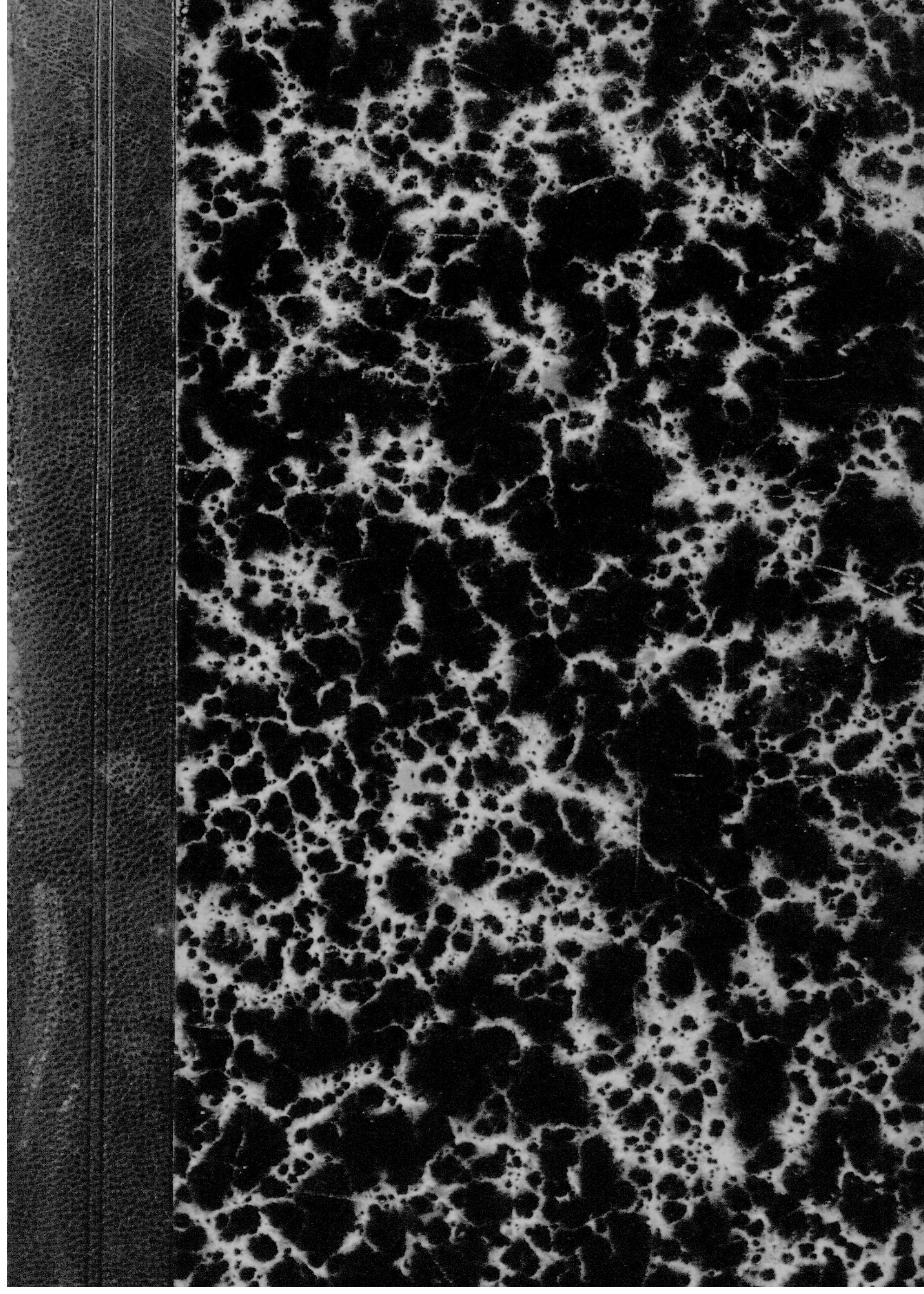




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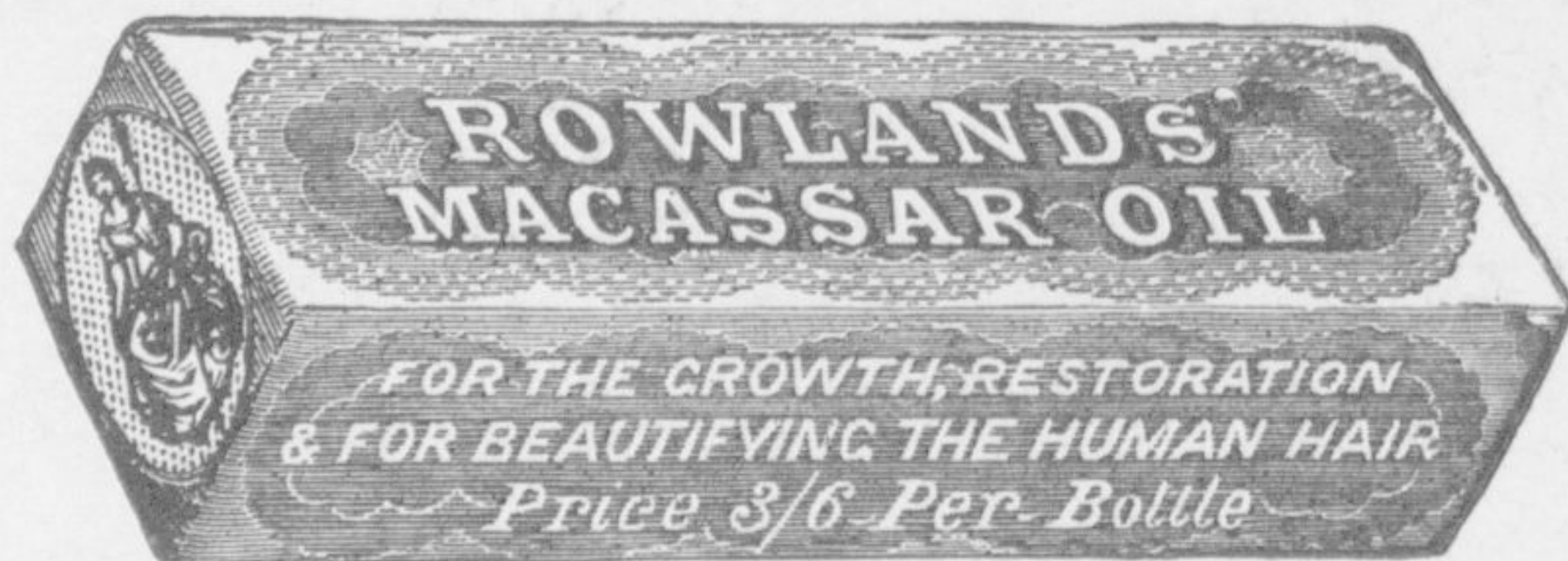
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De profundis clamavi,

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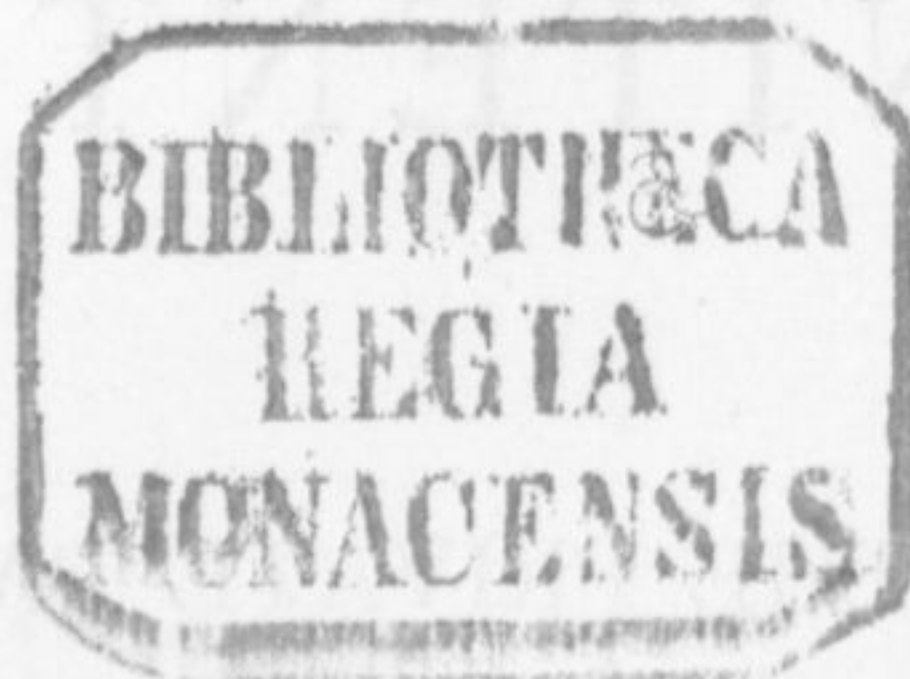
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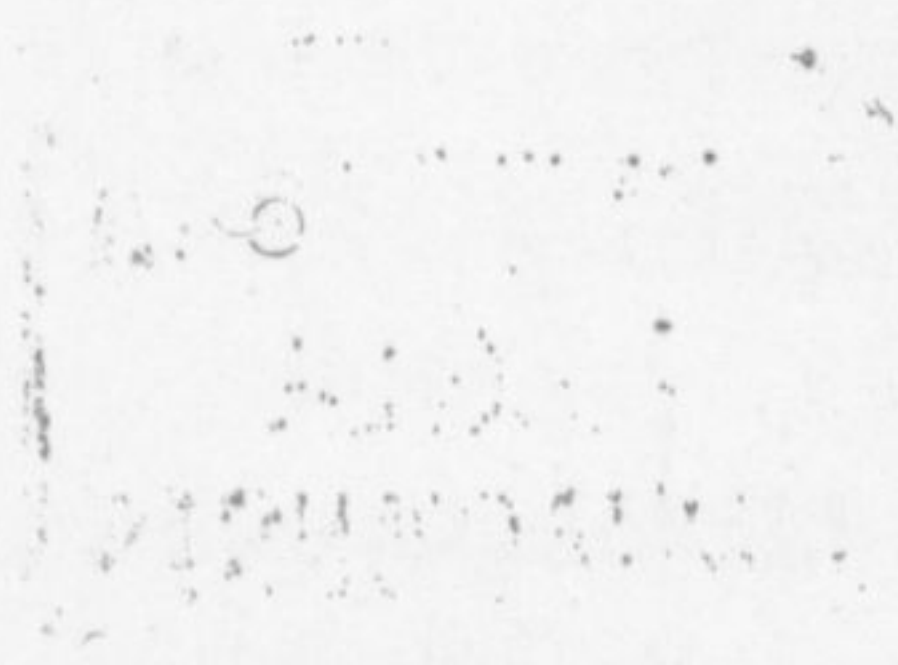
LATE MINISTER AT LYNNBRIDGE IN THE COUNTY OF LINCOLN.

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LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1892.





I.

“The hills of heaven,
Where I shall never win.”

I.

THROUGHOUT the wanderings of my early days—amid memories of the grey walls of an Abbey Church, of the smooth wide waters of the Ouse with its serried masses of yellow flags and floating lily-leaves, of the broad grass-grown streets and cobblestones, the far-reaching wolds and desolate farm-houses round about a bleak, bright Yorkshire town; of the darker and drearier alleys and cinder-strewn road-ways of a “centre of industry” in the Black Country; or of the peaceful fruit-gardens and sheep-trodden meadow-slopes amongst the Cotswold Hills—through every one of the various experiences which fell to my lot in childhood, I see two figures standing always in the foreground of my life.

First, the figure of a child,—a girl rather older than myself, and, as an elder, disposed to guide and to instruct, using the privileges of her age, sometimes, with a fine scorn of my preferences; so that our customary friendship would degenerate into

warfare which was more disastrous for me than for herself. It was I who generally pled first for pardon, and made peace whether I really felt myself right or wrong. Alison knew well enough that I could not do without her friendship, and made me suffer if I wilfully imperilled it. As we grew older dissension of any kind became, indeed, rare between us; it was only while we were too young to feel the worth of a good comrade that we quarrelled or fought. The little upright figure that I see was generally clad in grey or brown—nondescript tints that wore well and did not soil—but there was plenty of life and colour, by way of contrast, in the childish face. Dark flashing eyes; dark hair that curled and twisted rebelliously in spite of every effort (made with oil or a wet brush) to smooth and flatten it; a clear complexion, with fine rose-tints on cheek and lip—as far as I remember, the vivid colouring was simply thrown into stronger relief by the neutrality of the surrounding hues. This was my cousin Alison Dart.

I mention her first, not because she was dearer than the other, but that, perhaps, I approach the memory of the other with more reverence, with a deeper tenderness, with a more profound regret.

A little, faded, shrinking woman went in and out

amongst us, with bowed figure and grief-worn, down-cast eyes; she toiled like a slave from morning until night, and was yet never too weary to do a favour, never too tired to grant a request. Her slender hands seemed sometimes wonderfully strong; her frail figure sustained the load of a household without faltering. We called her our Aunt Grace; and, unheeding and childish as we were, we scarcely noticed the loneliness in which she lived, the aloofness which she kept from others in the house. Her brother—Alison's father—the Reverend Reuben Dart, seldom, if ever, spoke to her. His wife gave orders, conveyed requests, always in the coldest of tones. Aunt Grace helped to cook the dinner, came in late to table—sitting at one corner and taking the worst cut of the joint, the coldest morsel of potato, as if that were her right: shrinking away altogether if guests were present, and preferring hunger and cold in her own bedroom to festivity and feasting. She never accepted any of the invitations politely proffered from time to time by members of my uncle's congregation; she pleaded ill-health on these occasions, and was allowed to shelter herself behind the barrier of this excuse. But to us who saw her toiling from morn till night at the household tasks which Mrs. Dart disdained, who noted how diligently she sped

to chapel prayer-meetings and sermons on the rainiest and frostiest of winter nights, there seemed something incongruous in this description of Aunt Grace as "invalid." We came to the conclusion at last that Aunt Grace was shy, and as we were shy ourselves, we sympathised and applauded her;—in secret, however, and between ourselves; for we never dared make a remark about her to her face. With all her gentleness there was reserve in her bearing which kept us from familiarity. She was among us as one from a far country, a stranger, an alien, an inferior. I can see her still, slipping in after the others, to meals, to prayers, to chapel; always alone, always mutely apologetic and entreating, always immovably, unalterably sad.

The only time when I saw her moved beyond this shrinking silence and humility was when I had committed some childish fault which it fell to her lot to discover and report. I had stolen an orange and denied the fact. My uncle thrashed me somewhat unmercifully, and condemned me to bread and water for a week. This punishment made me sullen, not penitent; but what I found I could not endure was the sight of Aunt Grace's sorrow for my wrongdoing. She could not eat, I believe she could not

sleep; she wept so bitterly for me that at last I came to see that I ought to weep also for myself. What puzzled me was that she grieved as if she herself had done the wrong. I am quite sure that she would have borne the whipping for me if she could.

But oh, the unspeakable beauty and delight of the hours of leisure which I used to spend in the broad meadows about our house in Gloucestershire! Limitless they seemed to me, and as varied in sun and shade as the infinite sea itself. I have lain for hours amongst the cowslips gazing up into the serene depths of the blue heavens; I have watched with never-wearying attention the strange waves of shadow that swept across a sunny field; I have yearned with childish uncomprehending passion for the mystery of the distant purple hills, thinking of them as of that Celestial City which was seen from the Enchanted Ground.

“Those are the hills of heaven,” he said

“Where I shall never win!”

These are the lines that I remember now when I look upon the purple hills; lines with the echo in them of a sadder history than that of the pilgrim from the City of Destruction. But surely, I some-

times think, those long dreamy hours must have had a softening, a refining influence upon the nature of the child whose heart seemed to lie so close to Nature's self—too softening, perhaps, for health, and for the vigour with which I should have equipped myself for the battle of my life. A volume of verse would be smuggled out of the study when I could escape unseen; verse not of the highest character, we should now say, but much esteemed by the people amongst whom I lived—Mrs. Hemans, Montgomery, Kirke White. Once I found and secreted a mutilated little copy of Shelley's works, and at the age of twelve I was wild with enthusiasm for Lord Byron. Shakespeare I was allowed to read, and studied with unwearied interest; but Byron and Shelley were dearer and closer, as forbidden joys.

It would have been well for me, I now think, if my tastes had been discovered and scourged out of me; not that I look with anything but love and reverence on these two poets, but because I read them in secret, with the sense of committing sin. An odd kind of secretiveness, a persistency in reserve, was one of my earliest characteristics; and it became more confirmed at each indulgence. There was no one to win my confidence, nobody to whom I dared unfold the secrets of my heart. I had a

passion for things that were secret and forbidden, for tortuous ways, for unfathomable silences. If any friend or guardian could have won me away from my reserve, I sometimes fancy that half the sorrows of my later life had been avoided. The soul that lives alone in dream-castles is not fitted to cope with the cares of daily life.

But those were beautiful days, although they bore bitter fruit.

The reason of my long leisure and my loneliness was not far to seek. We were poor—sometimes very poor. As I was Mr. Dart's nephew, not his son, I could not be sent to the denominational schools provided for ministers' children. It was easier to find a cheap day-school for girls than one for boys. So Alison generally managed to tramp away to her school, while I loitered about the garden, repeated lessons in a perfunctory way to Mr. Dart, and wasted my time in watching the clouds on the meadows, or the tints upon the hills. Now and then I took a fit of industry, and made for myself elaborate plans of learning; long lists of the books I meant to read, of the studies I wanted to pursue. My uncle thought this interest in study spoke well for me. He did not care very much what one read, so long as it was not poetry or fiction, which he considered works of the

devil rather than of man. With a book not of the condemned class in one's hand, one was, to his mind, profitably employed, and safe at least from harm.

Alison shared my tastes to some extent; but she was not left free as I was to indulge them. She was pinned down in her leisure hours to tasks of needlework, long seams, patchwork, stocking-darning; anything to keep her hands busy and her feet still. Not for her was the long dreaming of a summer forenoon; not for her the silence of the sequestered hills. When we had a holiday, we spent it in some cheery expedition or some natural sport; there was not an ounce of morbidness in her nature, and on these occasions I bent myself to her attitude of mind. We had many a rare time together; but Alison never spent long hours with me in watching the golden lights on the rippling waters of a brook by the wayside, in studying the sculptured outlines of the folded clouds. She would have said, she would perhaps still say, that this was waste of time. To me, I must confess, the hours even now are never so full of gain as when I give them to the sky, the sea, the open wold. Why should we grudge nature our heart? we might as well grudge it to the God who made the world.

When I grew older we went to live in a cathedral town; and here we made an acquaintance which was of infinite value to us both. This was Allan Herrick, the son of a surgeon in a fairly large practice in the place. I came to know him at school; there was a big grammar school to which I was sent, and he was in the same class with me, although he was somewhat older. I do not think that I should ever have attempted to make friends with him if he had not insisted on cultivating me; but what was to be done with a fellow who walked home with you day after day, defended you from the attacks of ill-conditioned upper boys, and lent you delightful books out of his father's library? Allan was big, good-humoured, handsome, and audacious. I think he had an admiration for Alison, as well as a liking for me; he managed to make his way into our house, and to charm everybody by his unconscious health of body and of mind. Even Aunt Grace had a fleeting smile for him; Uncle Reuben patted him benignantlly on the shoulder, Aunt Maria smiled and beamed on him when he drew near. Already in those early days I began to wonder at the difference between myself and him,—he so frank, free, *debonair*, afraid of no man, full of enjoyment of life;

and I so timid, so poor-spirited, as it seemed to me, so wanting in will and in strength. I envied him his animal spirits and vivacity; and he, in return, envied me, he has since told me, my proficiency in Latin, my love for English literature, my very shyness and reserve. I was told afterwards also that the master of the school approved and forwarded our friendship;—it would be good for me, they thought, to imbibe a little of Allan's tempestuous enjoyment of life; good for him to be tempered with my love of books, my steadiness and patience. But, as a matter of fact, I believe that we produced very little effect upon one another.

Allan's history and the history of his family became better known to me as time went on. He came of a good stock. His forefathers were men of stainless honour and unbroken health; they had lived long lives and begotten many children. I think there was not a scandal in the history of the house. His father was a singularly charming man, wholesome, intelligent, honourable, and in every respect sane; his mother was cheerful, handsome, reasonable, and kind; and he had seven younger brothers and sisters, all representing the same type of fine health and sound mind. As for me, sickly from my birth and full of morbid fancies, I think

they pitied rather than liked me, but they adored Alison, and after all, Allan was my friend.

It went rather against him, though, in the estimation of my relations, that he once enticed me into the only piece of downright boyish mischief which I can remember in my early days. We broke a window, I remember, and we robbed an orchard—matters which might have passed undiscovered, if I had not managed to break my leg in getting away from an irate nurseryman. Allan had a thrashing from his father, and I was invalided for a number of weary weeks. The thing that marks that time to me was a curious change in feeling and sentiment which I attribute to the influence of my Aunt Grace.

I have said before how grieved she was when any of the faults of my boyhood were made known to her. In this case, my guilt came upon her like a blow. She made no allowances—it would have required, perhaps, a wider knowledge of life and a greater faith in human nature than she possessed for her to make allowances. I believe she thought, poor soul, that I was bound straight for hell.

And so, perhaps, I was—who knows? There is no gulf too deep for the soul of one who sees the

light and turns his back upon it; and in this parlous case Aunt Grace believed me to stand.

I shall never forget—God grant that I never may forget—the words I heard her utter one night at my bedside. She thought me sleeping; for I had been in great pain all day, and Mr. Herrick had given me an opiate; but I lay in a quiescent state between sleeping and waking, and heard, with strangely quickened senses, all that she said between the pauses of her sighs.

“Lord, give me this soul!” she cried aloud. “Blot me, I pray Thee, out of the book of life rather than that he should be lost. Visit upon my poor body all the sin and shame of my life; let none of the punishment descend to him. Thou hast said the sins of the fathers—the sins of the fathers”—and here she broke down, weeping pitifully, and for a time the sound of her sobs alone disturbed the silence of the room—“the sins of the fathers,” she said; and that was all.

“Lord, stay Thy hand,” she moaned at last. “Canst Thou not change the law that Thou hast made? Let me bear the punishment, as I committed the sin. Must the innocent suffer for the guilty? Let me bear all—let me suffer all, and a double portion if Thou wilt—but let this soul be

Thine. Oh, let him turn to Thee. In the hour of his temptation, in the hour of his agony, Lord, let him turn to Thee. My soul for his—my body for his—my heart for his, even as Thou didst give Thy heart and soul and body, O Lamb of God, for the sins of the whole wide world. My soul for his, O Lord Jesus, who loved us and gave Thyself for us.” And so on, with wild repetitions of the same phrase, with strangled sobs, with sighs and sobs through which there ran a note of utter hopelessness. Child as I was, I was conscious of the hopelessness. It impressed me with a sense of great awe; I felt that a dominant fate had to be propitiated, not that there was a protecting Hand to which we could cling. And yet we belonged to a sect which boasted of its freedom from a Calvinistic taint; but there are souls which are Calvinist by instinct, I believe, and to these Aunt Grace belonged. She had found odd volumes of Chalmers and Baxter in my uncle’s study; one of Jonathan Edwards’ books had fallen by accident into her hands, and she was an attentive reader of Spurgeon’s earlier sermons—then just beginning to be widely known. The mild and unexact character of Methodist Theology was by her acquiesced in with hesitation; she found more congenial food in creeds of a darker and more vindictive

type. It is a strange thing that women of the softest and kindest sort will sometimes seem positively to batten on doctrines which one might think only a fiend would hold.

The more I reflect on Grace Dart's history and character, the more I feel sure that her submissiveness and docility were the outcome of a will of steel. The shrinking, timid figure that we knew masked a soul of fire. She had strong passions, wild moments of exaltation or despair; all manifestation of which was repressed by a stern resolution to seem what her conscience told her that she ought to be—what her brother had decreed that she should ever be—a soul apart, a woman betrayed, defiled, disgraced.

Ah, for such a result—such sweetness, such saintliness—one can almost bear to write the words that seem like an outrage to her memory. But I will speak of her no more; she was for many years a haunting riddle to which I vainly sought the key; and now that I hold it, I seem to myself as one

“Who would peep and botanise
Upon his mother's grave.”

I did not move an eyelid as she knelt and

prayed for me, although my heart swelled and a great lump rose in my throat. It would have seemed like sacrilege to show that I had heard that prayer. I longed at last intensely for her to go; this enforced silence induced in me a nervous irritability which I scarcely knew how to control. After a time she rose from her knees, kissed me gently on the brow, and stole away to the room beside mine which she usually occupied. Then, left alone, I was free to bury my face in the pillow and give vent in deep long-drawn sobs to the half-hysterical emotion engendered by her prayers and tears.

I never mentioned that little scene to her. But during the rest of my enforced seclusion my mind turned with almost morbid persistency towards religious matters. I had not been without spiritual experiences of a childish kind, but they had had small effect upon my outer life. They had not tended to preserve me from small deceits, dishonesties, disobediences, such as flourish in the soil of most children's lives, especially of those children who (like myself) hear a great deal about religious feeling and have to fight out the great battle of a true morality for themselves without instruction or assistance; they had never checked certain morbid

tendencies which I was not physically strong enough to disregard nor wise enough to subdue. To be good by instinct one must have a stainless ancestry and a sound constitution: as most children have neither, they need goodness to be taught as a fine art. That was exactly what nobody understood when I was young. It is hard work to puzzle out the art of goodness for oneself.

I thought less in those days of "goodness" than of various experiences which I knew under the names of "conviction," "conversion," "justification," and so on. There was a regular process to be gone through, culminating in "entire sanctification," a state which I cannot say I ever reached. Far be it from me to scoff at words which represented very great realities to the minds of those who used them; but I think that they were put too readily into the mouths of the young and ignorant. The whole thing was terribly puzzling to me. I had been "converted" surely, and had "gained peace," but what was the good of it when I lost [my "peace" and grew deadly tired of prayer and Bible-reading in a week's time? I had for years a habit of being "converted," as I called it, every other Sunday, and of backsliding in the course of the week, always comforting myself with the reflection that I should

be sure to "return to the narrow way" on the following Sabbath. These were the mere natural ups and downs of a susceptible temperament; but I was then fully persuaded that if I died on the Saturday (say) before the day for conversion had come round again, I should assuredly go to hell. I conceived God as lying in wait for my soul, like a hungry cat for a mouse. And yet I enjoyed the excitement of the weekly or fortnightly religious fit, which was, each time, perfectly sincere, and foreseen only by that self-knowledge which makes older people aware that they will weep on Tuesday evening when they go to see Irving, and laugh on Thursday night with Toole.

But after hearing Aunt Grace's prayer for me, I rose a little way; at least, I became capable of a steadier inward life. I fostered my emotions on Thomas à Kempis and George Herbert—as many another soul has done before me. And if the long sunny hours that I have spent upon the river banks or in a fragrant garden reading and thinking over some devout poem of the English clergyman, some mystical sentence of the mediæval monk, appear to me now but like the memory of a dream, I am still saddened to reflect on its unfruitfulness, and the little value of those tender and peaceful hours.

Curiously enough, while drawing almost all my religious inspiration from the writings of a Roman monk and an Anglican priest, I had an intense horror of the Churches of England and of Rome alike. I should have been afraid to enter a "Papistical" place of worship; and an English church was to me little better than a theatre. I disbelieved solemnly in the godliness of any member of these communions, and tried my best to convince Allan Herrick that he ought to leave the church in which he had been brought up and become a Methodist like me. I can still see the expression of his face and the poise of his limbs as he threw himself back on the green bank where we were sitting and roared with mirth at the idea.

This narrowness of outlook was not original on my part. It was simply an expression of the views of those around me. "We are the people, and wisdom will die with us," is the surer to be the motto of a sect or a party in proportion to its smallness.

How far away from me all this old life seems! And yet it is not so many years ago. It is perhaps a gain to have lived in two different worlds—worlds as different from one another in sentiment, in aspiration, in opinion, as though they were separated by

thousands of miles or centuries of time. I am a young man still—not much more than forty years of age—and all this happened when I was a boy. After a course of Arnold, Renan, Spencer, and the lesser lights of our modern days, one would imagine that to have had these experiences and to have thought these thoughts must mean superannuation. It is such a little while ago; and yet so long! And I am young, they say; and yet so old! I think it must be the very errors of that time which give it a certain charm: its fears, its perplexities, its haunting sense of responsibility, have a fascination for one; and as for its past joys and dreams and hopes and ideals, these are indeed

“The hills of heaven,
Where I shall never win.”

II.

“Say not the struggle nought availeth.”

II.

I AM sometimes troubled by the thought that my life is so sordid, I am set down amid such base conditions, that those who read this record will scorn me for the place I occupy, and still more for the place in which I grew. I pray such as read these lines—for I trust that they may some day be given to the world, so that it may see what manner of man I was—to take into account this fact: that if I did not inhabit any realm of gorgeous colouring, of music and perfume, light and beauty, such as attracts the interest of the crowd, I have yet a heritage in all that is noblest of man. All that the lordliest philosopher has known of culture, art, religion, belongs to him no more than it belongs to me. I also am the heir of the ages, the inheritor of Time. Why, then, should I be base in your sight? True, I was never noble, nor wealthy, nor fair to see. But the things that make the world beautiful to others were mine—mine: no adverse fate could

come between me and their possession: mine are the sunbeams, the flowers, the beauty of earth, the love of woman, the prattle of babes, the struggle with evil, the conquest of self, the things for which men have fought and died, and of which the world will never tire. So you too have loved and triumphed and been crowned a king. "Et in Arcadia ego"—it is all I have to say. I have no distinction, but I have the claim of a common humanity: I have suffered, and I am a man.

Yet, even in writing the above lines, I feel that they belong to another age; they are the offspring of the man that was brought up on the romance of Scott and Lytton, the verse of Byron and Shelley; out of harmony with this realistic, scoffing generation; a little out of harmony with myself. I have spoken truisms, but it is because I design to strip my soul so bare that its shivering surface would fain be clothed upon by a truism. Oh, I have nothing original to say; and I have no right to your pity as a sufferer; for I do not write because I have suffered, but because I have sinned. If I had been what the world calls "a good man," I would not write. I tell my story with the dim hope that the pain it

causes me may help to expiate a crime. A heathen notion—but I write all the same.

My religious notions strengthened with my growth. I had some few seasons of darkness and doubt, but I treated them as temptations of the devil, and fought them down like sins. I remember well how one of them was caused. I came into the parlour one evening after tea and found my uncle engaged in conversation with a certain Mr. Spring, a minister from another part of England. I took a seat humbly behind the door and listened, expecting to be edified—possibly even to be amused. Mr. Spring was a benevolent-looking, mild-faced old man, with white hair and sea-blue eyes; he held his hands clasped over a stick as he spoke, and looked before him with a dreamy gaze which interested me at once. I knew him by name; he was often spoken of as “Father” Spring, for he was one of the oldest as well as one of the best-loved of our spiritual fathers.

“I confess,” he was saying gently, “that I do not feel the security that I should wish to feel upon that point, brother. I know myself guilty of so many weaknesses, so many lapses from the faith, so much of sin needing to be forgiven, that I cannot feel myself sanctified throughout. I trust that this

higher gift will be accorded to me before I go hence, even if it be only in the very moment of my death."

Then I knew that they were talking about a favourite doctrine of the sect,—one known to them as "entire sanctification." I looked at Father Spring with respect and also with a little surprise; he had a great reputation amongst us for holiness, and I was amazed to hear him acknowledge the absence of a gift to which very inferior men sometimes laid claim. As I wondered, my uncle struck in, with great complacency of tone.

"For myself, Brother Spring"—Mr. Dart would not on any account have called him "Father,"—"I feel that I have attained that inestimable gift. I have had entire sanctification. That blessing was bestowed upon me one Sunday evening, when—"

The door was still slightly open. I slipped from my seat and vanished upstairs, unmindful of a kindly parting glance from Father Spring, who would fain have called me back to give me, as he usually did upon his visits, his blessing and a silver coin of the realm—"for myself." But I had heard enough. Something in my uncle's speech revolted me; I felt as if I should have had to cry aloud in contradiction of his statements if I listened longer.

I went into my bedroom and sat down on the window-seat. My room was at the top of the house, and looked towards the west. I could see the sun sinking behind the low ranges of hills, and the gleam of its beams upon the river; overhead the sky was rose-red and purple, with edging lines of gold. I gazed, but thought little of the sunset glory, though I have always remembered it since.

"What is the matter, Stephen?" said Alison's voice.

I had left the door wide open, and she walked in with a pile of linen on her arm. She pulled out one of the drawers of a press, and began to lay the snowy folds on each other at the bottom of the drawer. She was only fifteen then, but she looked like a woman grown.

"I don't know. At least I know; but I suppose you will be angry if I say it."

"Not if you don't mean to say anything wrong. Go on."

"Father Spring and Uncle Reuben are talking in the parlour. Father Spring says he hasn't got entire sanctification yet, and uncle says *he* has."

"Well?" Alison shut the drawer with some sharpness, and then leaned against the press and regarded me dispassionately.

"I would rather be like Mr. Spring than Uncle Reuben any day," I said sullenly.

"You have no business to say anything against father, Stephen."

"I know that: I am not saying anything against him. But if Mr. Spring can be as good as he is without 'entire sanctification,' I'd rather not have it; that's all."

I thought that Alison would have flown at me angrily for this speech; but she did nothing of the kind. She only flushed, looked down at the floor, and knitted her dark brows. As for me, I sat and thought involuntarily of the moments when Uncle Reuben had boxed my ears for trifling misdeeds; of the fury into which he would fly if his shirts were not sufficiently white and smooth; of the silence to which he would sometimes reduce his household when he was in an irritable mood, and the bacon was too dry at breakfast or the potatoes hard at dinner. It is impossible to believe in the entire sanctification of any man who finds fault with his food. I think even Alison recognised that fact.

"You ought not to judge, you are not old enough," she said at last.

"If I am not old enough now, I never shall be. I have eyes in my head."

"I suppose it does not matter what name we call it, so long as we try to be good," she said. "Perhaps father calls it one name and Mr. Spring another; but we know that they are both good men."

"Goodness seems to be a very different thing in one person from what it is in another," I said resentfully, not in the least knowing that I spoke the truth.

"We know what it is for ourselves, any way," said Alison practically. And then she went downstairs, leaving me to meditations that were anything but cheerful. Alison had no great sympathy with my moods, my vagaries; she was a clear-headed, sensible girl, whose advice it would often have been better for me if I had followed.

In this case, her words produced no effect on me; and I sank into a curious state of apathy and depression which lasted for a good many months. These technical terms, so to speak, of religion stood in my way. My uncle's claim to "entire sanctification," or "perfect holiness," was a stumbling-block such as I thought I never could surmount. It is a little odd to reflect sometimes how much torture can be given by names and phrases which are useless and obsolete. Honestly, I have a great pity

for myself in my youth and for those who were brought up like me. It can be of absolutely no advantage to any one to live in fear and dread of the Higher Powers, to consume his energies in emotional raptures or agonising prayers for the safety of his soul; and in a mere child, or a youth entering on life, the health of brain and nerves was often permanently injured by overstrain from this cause. I write of a bygone day: the present generation have been brought up under happier auspices; and of course every child was not abnormally sensitive to religious influences, as I think I was.

But with developing physical strength the spell of the depression passed away; and I passed through a phase of healthier life and work, during which I was but occasionally dominated by religious impressions. This brighter period lasted until I left school, when I again fell upon darker days.

My schooldays ceased when I was fifteen. This was the year in which we quitted the cathedral town where I had formed my friendship with Allan Herrick. We wrote to each other and maintained our friendship—but with some difficulty, for it was more and more evident that our paths in life were to differ very widely. He won a scholarship that took him

to Oxford, whence I heard from him but seldom. When he wrote he told me that he was working hard, and that when he had taken his degree he meant to go home again and help his father. He gave me a list of books now and then that he said I ought to read; and adjured me energetically to "throw over that wretched Dissenting business," work up for a scholarship and join him at Oxford, "where," he said, "we would have glorious times."

Meanwhile my uncle apprenticed me to a grocer.

It is easy to laugh now; but the memory of those days will always be exquisitely painful to me. I don't think I ever learned anything about the grocer's business. My mind closed itself obstinately to all details on the subject of cheeses, sugars, teas. I was hopelessly incapable. I could not fold a parcel neatly, nor wind string the right way. All the things which are as second nature to ordinary boys were mysteries to me. As the grocer said to my uncle, I had "no gumption," "no *go*," in me at all. And what with sneers and jeers in the shop, and bitter reproaches from my uncle, and tears from Aunt Grace over my delinquencies, I began to feel as if I should lose the small amount of brains I possessed. Indeed, I did not feel sure that I ever had any. I grew disheartened with myself. Of one thing I was

sure: that I was not like my fellows; and unlikeness was misery. It does not much matter whether one is better or worse than one's companions: misery is quite sufficiently ensured by difference.

Alison rescued me from my Slough of Despond. She was, as I have mentioned, a little older than myself, and far more developed, far wiser and more practical than I. We had long left off quarrelling, and were close friends whenever she was at home; but of late she had been sent to a fairly good boarding school, where she was qualifying herself to be a governess. When I had been a grocer's apprentice for more than a year, she came home for her long summer holidays; and on the occasions of our meeting—for I slept and spent my Sundays still at my uncle's house—I noticed that she eyed me with a concern and an attention which irritated me. I spoke of her behaviour at last.

"Why do you look at me so?" I said. We were living in a town, and we had no meadows or river-banks to wander in on Sunday afternoons; but we had a small plot of grass, at the back of the house, where we could sit on a bench in the soft summer air and read or talk if we felt inclined. It was better than the stuffy parlour, or even our common harbour of refuge, Aunt Grace's room.

"I will not look at you if it annoys you," she said softly, and dropped her eyes at once upon her book. I remember that it was *David Elginbrod*, and I had felt shocked at seeing her with a work of fiction in her hands on a Sunday afternoon. In those days I was far more strict than Alison.

Her new softness and gravity irritated me the more. I began to fancy that she pitied me—or rather, looked down upon me for my position. For Alison was gradually raising herself, and I was sinking below her level. She was working hard at school, reading, thinking, aspiring; and I was—selling cheeses and wrapping up pounds of tea. It was the consciousness of inferiority that drove me to the bitterness of my reply.

"I know why you look at me. You think I have grown coarse and common since you were here last. I have. I know I have. What could you expect? I am below you, and I shall always be below you. Perhaps you don't even like my sitting on the same seat with you. Well, I will go away."

But I did not go away. The book slipped from her lap to the ground as she leaned forward and stretched out her hands to mine.

"Stevie!" she said, using an old familiar name

that she had often given me in our childish days. "Stevie, Stevie! dear boy! how *can* you? Stevie!"

I was obliged to look at her, and as I looked my eyes grew dim, because I saw the tears in hers. She held my hands and stroked them with a little caressing gesture, but for a time we did not speak.

"What is it then?" I said at last, rather huskily.

"I did not know. I did not mean to look at you very much," she answered. "But it must have been because I thought you looked unhappy. Are you *very* unhappy, Stephen?"

"Why do you ask?" I said, pulling away my hands. "You know that I am wretched—miserable. And I shall never be any better. You are rising above me every day, and I am sinking lower and lower: I wish I were dead. I wish I had never been born." I rested my elbows on my knees, and my face on my hands. I felt that she looked at me with pity, but I could not bear just then to meet her eyes—the tears in my own had fallen upon my cheeks, and I was ashamed that she should see me cry.

"Stephen," she said gently, but with the decision of tone to which I was accustomed from her: "you must not give way. What would become of any of us if we gave way? I have looked at you a good

deal lately because I have been trying to picture you in different scenes, where you would be happy and useful, and I think I know what would suit you."

"That is easy enough. Almost anything would suit me better than my present life."

She took little notice of my sullen tone.

"Stephen, don't you remember what you used to say you would do? that you would go into the ministry when you were old enough? Why don't you?"

"Alison! I am only just seventeen."

"But you might begin to prepare. There was George Grant: he was an exhorter when he was your age, and a local preacher when he was eighteen: he was a candidate for the ministry when he was nineteen. You are far cleverer than he, and you are fond of books and would make a capital minister, I am sure." She nodded at me and smiled out of her bright dark eyes. "That is your vocation, Stephen; and you'll be president one of these days."

Her confident, careless manner gave me a shock. She took, as usual, a thoroughly direct and practical view of the situation. To me, with my morbid self-consciousness and exaggerated estimate of the importance of a preacher's calling, her words seemed first like a profanity, then a stimulant, lastly a delight.

But at first, as I say, they staggered me. I rose, stretching out my hands, as if for support, trembling as I stood.

"But how can I—how can I—if I have no call from God?" I said.

I see her at this moment in my mind's eye, as plainly as I saw her then. She was leaning back on the old wooden seat, the sunlight playing between the overhanging boughs upon her vividly tinted face, upon the clustering coils and plaits of raven hair, the peach-like bloom of her oval cheek on which one could see the faint shadow of her long dark eyelashes, the well-marked, slightly knitted brows above the liquid eyes, the coral of her curved lips. Her figure was tall and fine, rounder perhaps than that of most girls of her age, firm and lithe rather than graceful: in fact, she had all the glow of health and youth without very much of the softness of womanhood. There was a look almost of perplexity upon her level brows. She had made a suggestion which, as she rightly conceived, might be of infinite value to me; and she could not in the least understand either my agitation or my doubts.

"Oh, but you will have a call, of course," she said, quite lightly. "I think it is very probable that you have one which you have never recognised. We

are called by the fitness of things, Stephen. It is far more fitting for you to be a minister than to serve in a grocer's shop; and I shall tell father so."

She picked up her book and began straightening out the leaves as if she had settled the whole question. I turned round on her rather sharply.

"Don't say a word about it. Not yet—not yet. I must be *sure* before I speak."

And then I went away to my own room and locked myself in, tingling from head to foot with the excitement of this new idea.

I was an ignorant lad of seventeen, with few ideals and small knowledge of the world. I belonged to the "lower" classes: the *bourgeois*, the small shop-keeper, was my natural equal: the clerk and the post-office official were decidedly my superiors. I was occupied in manual labour of a fatiguing and uninteresting kind for twelve hours a day: I went out with a basket on my arm, swept the shop floor, was occasionally cuffed—being small and slight for my age—by my master, and sworn at and bullied all day long by the foreman of the shop. Pah! it is a life too mean, too uninviting in its details, too malodorous to bear description—my gorge rises at the remembrance of it: my heart turns sick with a

sort of indignant pity for myself as errand-boy and apprentice in that unutterably loathsome establishment. There was not even a wholesome sense of honesty about the work: Mr. Bartlett, the grocer, knew and employed all "the tricks of the trade," and cheated the public almost as much as he himself was cheated by his employés. It was part of my misery that I did not know how to cheat, and could not learn.

It is well for pious sentimentalists to prate of the beauty of work and the divinity of drudgery; but I suppose that nobody will go so far as to declare that one should be happy in a foul atmosphere (foul morally and mentally, I mean), or cheerfully busy with the picking of pockets.

And apart from the lowness of tone that prevailed in that particular shop, there were other reasons for my discomfort. I was, as I have said, a son of the *bourgeois*. Mr. Dart's brother was a prosperous draper, and their father had been a draper before him. The only relations that we knew of were in trade. A great many of our friends were the tradespeople, of whom my uncle's congregations were largely composed. But in spite of my being, as it were, *steeped* in trade, I had an angry and unreasoning dislike to it. There seemed

to be within me instincts and tastes which were incompatible with a life of mere money-grubbing. I longed for the things that were most out of my reach: scholarship, refinement, art, beauty—longed with all the blind force of a temperament which I can now characterise as pleasure-loving, sensitive, sensuous: in a word, the artistic temperament. It is not one that I admire, not one that I desire to see a friend or a friend's child possess; but it was unfortunately mine, and mine by the most fatal of all laws, that of inheritance.

But I did not know that then. I did not know what was meant by the new emotions that quickened my blood in the spring sunshine, the joy of living hourly checked by the dull routine of my environment. I only knew that I was daily, hourly, bowed to the earth by a consciousness that all the things in the world for which I cared were slipping from me, and that I had better die than live this mean and ignoble life. I had no wish to succeed in Mr. Bartlett's line. I did not care to be rich and respected, from his point of view. I despised his success from the bottom of my heart. Death would be preferable, by far——

And it is very possible that I should have died if Alison had not put a glimmer of hope into my

life. For I was overworked and underfed: I could neither eat nor sleep; and I drooped from day to day, feeling my limbs beneath me heavy as lead and my heart cold as a stone. And yet I had not objected when my uncle apprenticed me; I had been partly too much startled and dazed to resist his will; and besides, I was in the habit of obeying, and my submission was taken for granted.

Aunt Grace was anxious about me. She would have petted and pitied me if she could; but, since the general opinion in the house was that I had grown into an idle, ungrateful, malingering rascal, she did not dare to say a word in my favour. I saw her looking at me with wide, pitiful eyes; and I took a certain sort of comfort from the conviction that, miserable as I might be, unsuccessful, sickly, sullen, Aunt Grace had always loved me and loved me still.

But it was Alison's suggestion that put new life into me. Small as the post of a Dissenting minister may seem in worldly eyes, it represented the highest dignity and the extreme point of learning and refinement within my ken. And the work itself—the work of “saving souls”—was inexpressibly grand and beautiful to me; as it is still—with a difference.

Of course I was touched at first with a vision of "the mission-field": the romance of cloudless skies and waving palms and coral islands, where dusky-skinned savages, clad in shells and feather cloaks and wreaths of tropic flowers, listened eagerly to the tale of a great Saviour from the West. But this dream soon passed away. In fact, I see its charm now, in the light of recent books of travel and adventure, far more clearly than I saw it in the days when I derived my knowledge of the South Sea Isles exclusively from missionary magazines.

I came back to life again. I had an object of my own. I could afford to be patient with the discomforts of my work, when I hoped that their existence had a period. I went sedulously through the usual steps: became Sunday-school teacher, exhorter, lay-preacher, in turn; held up my head and smiled serenely when my companions laughed and called me "prig" or "saint." But it was not until more than eighteen months had elapsed, and I was in my nineteenth year, that I dared to speak of the goal which I had set before myself.

I mentioned it one Sunday evening when Alison was present, for she always gave me courage. It was mid-winter, and we were sitting quietly round the fire, as we sometimes did on a Sunday evening,

Of late we had seemed a more united family—less apt to drift into corners and sit apart. Alison's success as a teacher, and my growing "seriousness," had something to do with this, I think. Even Aunt Grace sat with us oftener than she used to do, and smiled sometimes in sympathy with us.

Mr. Dart had been dozing in his arm-chair, and did not seem at first to understand what I had said. I repeated my little speech; it had been carefully prepared. I said—modestly, I trust, but using the phraseology to which I was accustomed—that I believed I was "called to the ministry," and that I hoped he would further my desires to take up that vocation.

My uncle was a spare, gaunt man with high features, a skin much coarsened by exposure to the weather, and a fringe of black whisker running round his face, leaving his long upper lip and part of his chin bare. He would have been good-looking but for an habitual frown and compression of his full lips. Alison was like him in feature and colouring, but in her the harshness of his physiognomy, as of his character, had been modified.

He sat up, put his hands on the arms of his chair, and looked at me. "You—you—*you!*" he said, and that was all. "*You!*" There was astonish-

ment, dismay, almost contempt, in the tone. Then he shot a glance—just one—at his sister Grace. She had let her book fall from her hands, and was gazing at me with an air of fright, mingled with a curious kind of ecstasy, which I could not understand. Aunt Maria gave a nervous, sniggering little laugh, which seemed to summarise the difficulties of the situation. I rose from my chair.

“Yes, I,” I answered back boldly. “I have preached already, and met with acceptance; and if the Lord has set His seal upon my work, why should you say me nay?”

“I have not said you nay,” said Mr. Dart sternly, “but this is a solemn matter, and cannot be lightly answered. You had better think again, and see whether you are certain of your own heart and of the call from God.”

He had recovered from the first shock of his astonishment, but there was still something incomprehensible in his face as he looked at me. There seemed to be in it a knowledge of myself which was little flattering. He had always distrusted me, and he distrusted me just then more than ever.

Alison broke the silence with her clear, even tones.

“I think that Stephen would make a very good

minister!" she said, "and I don't think he would ever make a tradesman at all. Mr. Gough thinks very highly of his powers as an exhorter." Mr. Gough was the leading man in our congregation. Dear Alison! she was always on my side. Her words produced some effect, for Alison had made herself respected in the family.

"If Mr. Gough thinks in that way," said Aunt Maria immediately, "you had better consult him before you do anything, Reuben."

"I will consider the matter," said my uncle magisterially. And at this point I thought it as well to withdraw. I had said my say; I could do nothing more, for without my uncle's aid I was practically helpless. But it was a great thing to have Alison on my side.

I had gone to my room, and was standing in the dark, wondering whether I would get a candle and a book or go to bed at once, when a soft foot came toiling up the attic stairs. I knew that Aunt Grace was there, and I went out to meet her, and to say good-night. To my surprise, she put her arms round me and burst into tears. But I could not get her to tell me whether anything was wrong. What she said between her sobs was almost un-

intelligible to me. "I am so thankful," she said. "You will make up for all, Stephen, for all that has gone amiss. I thank God—I thank God." And yet she wept, as if from a breaking heart.

III.

“Of love which never found its earthly close.”

III.

ALISON and I carried the day. We carried it against a curious wave of opposition that raised itself, involuntarily as it seemed, in the breasts of Mr. and Mrs. Dart, and which I did not understand until much later. "They must have had some other plans for you," Alison said to me once with knitted brows and a puzzled look in her dark eyes. On no other supposition could we explain away the mystery of those doubtful silences in which my uncle would listen when I tried to lay before him my hopes and aspirations. The husband and wife would glance at each other and occasionally at Aunt Grace with fearful, questioning, not altogether unkindly eyes. At the end of our longest colloquies, it always appeared to me that something was left unsaid. And Aunt Grace's flushed face, quivering lips, and fluttering eyelids made me feel at those times as if she had a larger share in the settlement of my fate than I could understand. It took all my self-command, and

all my morbid sensitiveness too, to keep me from crying out—"Let me into this secret. What is there against me that I do not know? Am I afflicted with the germ of some fatal disease? Is there anything in my history which must necessarily shadow my career?" But I did not put these questions, and by and by the opposition seemed to wear itself out.

I had never concerned myself very much about my parents. I had been told, when a child, that they were dead, and that I was not to talk about them. All questions on my part had been quickly checked; and I had gathered a vague impression that my uncle had not been very friendly with them. I did not even know their names; but I had always taken it for granted that my father was a younger brother of Reuben Dart. Now, while my fate was in the balance, I began to wonder whether the doubt with which Uncle Reuben regarded me had any connection with the history of my parents.

I did not like to open the subject when any third person was present. But one day I happened to find myself alone with him in the study, and I said timidly—

"Uncle Reuben, I have never asked you any questions about myself."

“And I desire that you will not do so,” he said, with unusual quickness.

“I thought that I ought to know——”

“You will know in time all that you ought to know. There is nothing very good to tell you.” Mr. Dart’s voice grew stern. “Leave well alone.”

“Am I never to know anything about my parents?” I asked, after a moment’s pause.

“In good time.” Then Mr. Dart, with a very grim face, looked at me straight from under his bended brows. “I will tell you this much,” he said. “There was no home for you but the workhouse when I took you in. I have treated you as my own son, as Alison’s brother. I have a claim to something from you in return; and what I ask just now is that you leave all thoughts of the parents you have lost, and trust to me to tell you whatever is necessary—if anything is ever necessary—at the proper time.”

“I will leave it in your hands, uncle; you have been very good to me,” I said, more moved than I liked to admit. He frowned in reply; but for almost the first time I discerned the kindness underneath the frown, and began to estimate the man’s character at its true worth.

Grim, stern, sometimes ill-tempered, sometimes

selfish, sometimes disposed to exalt himself above the rest of the world; *dour*, as the Scotch would have called him, and inflexible in rule, he had a nature that was kindly and a heart that was warm, and was capable of acts of astonishing magnanimity. He was not an easy man to live with; but he had his good points. And I owe him more than I was ever able to repay.

I spoke no more then of my parents; but it seemed to me that after this little dialogue my uncle's manner was gentler than it had been before; and in a very few days he withdrew all show of opposition to my wishes. My apprenticeship was nearly at an end; and when that was over, I set myself with alacrity to studying the subjects which would be required of me as "a candidate for the ministry." This was delightful work, and at the examinations which followed I acquitted myself, I was told, more than creditably. Small scholarship was required. A course at the training college for young men preparing for "the work" was imposed upon me; this course would last three years, after which time I should enter upon a further probation as assistant to older ministers. At the end of four years I should be ordained, appointed to a "circuit," and at liberty, if I chose, to marry. According to

the stringent rule of the Connection, I was bound not to become engaged during my stay at College, nor married during my four years of probation—a very salutary rule, considering the age at which most of us entered College, and the station from which some of us were raising ourselves. Of course, engagements of marriage could not be absolutely prevented among the students, but they were discountenanced by the authorities and only entered into surreptitiously. And seven years of probation and enforced celibacy sometimes produced such astonishing changes in a man's point of view that the prohibition of a positive betrothal at the beginning of his career was a blessing in more ways than one.

So I betook myself to College, and worked hard and zealously. Even at the end of the first year I had gained some little distinction among my fellows, and when I came home at vacation time I was treated with grave consideration and asked to preach in my uncle's pulpit. I gave satisfaction even to him, and Aunt Grace's soft eyes sparkled with silent joy and thankfulness while they were wet with tears. For myself, these quiet studious days, with the half-yearly home-comings (that seemed all the pleasanter because of the past days when I used to be the

trouble and perplexity of the household) were perhaps the most fruitful and peaceful of my life.

Mr. Dart and his family had removed to a pleasant country town when I went home one summer, the close of my second college year. I had then not seen my cousin Alison for nearly twelve months. She had been in Germany at Christmas time, having spent a few months there for the purpose of acquiring the language. We both looked at each other with considerable interest and curiosity when we met; and I remember that one of my first impressions was that I had suddenly grown older than Alison, who used to pose as my elderly adviser. She was really only a few months older than I. But she was in the bloom and freshness of youth and health; and I had studied hard and looked older than my years. In mind, too, I was now older than Alison, and I had acquired a certain masterfulness of manner which at first surprised and then a little impressed her. Our positions were somehow reversed: it was she that was the learner and I the teacher now.

In all this there was the natural vanity of my age and condition; and something more: the determining quality of sex. For Alison was a beautiful young woman, and I was a man, and she had long

since ceased to treat me as a child. When she elevated me suddenly into the place of spiritual director and began to lay some of her doubts and difficulties before me—for she had been reading Strauss in Germany, and had begun to revolt from popular religious forms—I felt that my fate was sealed. No one in the world could ever be so dear to me as Alison.

It is with a sort of sad amusement that I remember now how summarily I dealt with her difficulties, how glibly I explained away her doubts. When I preached, I addressed my sermons to her: they had the one merit of being, I think, sincere, and as such I suppose they struck her. She was under the spell of that brief madness which makes opinion reel: she wanted to believe as I bade her, to think as I thought. For the time she abrogated her judgment in favour of mine, as women will do when they love—though not for ever. There comes a time when they take up the reins again and direct the course of their own mind; but while the enchantment works, they drop the reins into their lover's hands.

“How wonderful it all is,” she said one night, as we stood in the silver moonlight at my uncle's

garden-gate. It was a Tuesday, and we had been together on a long expedition to a distant village where I had been asked to preach. Nobody thought of chaperons for Alison and me—we had lived like brother and sister for so many a long year! We had trudged back through the narrow country lanes, a very ordinary pair—a Dissenting student and a poor schoolmistress, with not a penny to their fortune—yet feeling themselves as much the centre of a world of love and romance and passion as any hero or heroine with whose fame the world has rung.

“Of love that never knew its earthly close”—why should I dwell upon its phases? Once, speaking to a woman who had loved long and worthily, and had lived in honour and happiness for many years with a husband who adored her, I touched on the peculiar blessedness of her lot, which had never, apparently, been darkened by misfortune, fear, sin, or the shadow of death. She answered by a smiling reference to the saying, “Whom the gods love die young”; adding in a graver tone that she thought the most satisfying and perfect love in the world was that which had been cut short, as we call it, by the death of one of the lovers. “For you may be quite sure,” she said quietly, “that in the course of

life, the love of either husband or wife lapses ultimately into a long regret; and that one or other is always saying 'How he—or she—loved me once!'"

But whether this is true or not, Alison and I never tried.

"What is wonderful?" I asked her, when she had made that exclamation.

"All of it," she answered, smiling at me frankly. "That you should have *done it*—have proved yourself worthy of our faith in you—*my* faith in you, Stephen: have risen out of that drudging life and become what you are now! Oh, it is splendid, and I am proud of you!"

"There is nothing to be proud of in me, Alison," I said, rather sadly.

"Oh, but there is—there is indeed. You preach so well, Stephen, and every one says you are so clever. Really, it is all I can do to keep myself from being afraid of you!"

She spoke from the lips only, but I was not going to be diverted from the purpose which had leaped full-formed into my mind.

"Alison, don't you know that I owe all my happiness to you? If you had never uttered that word of hope, I might even now have been eating my

heart out in that miserable hole! You gave me the clue—you helped me out of the pit—it is to you, under God, that I owe all I am or all I shall ever be.

“Oh no, Stephen; you would have found out your own powers without me!”

“When it was perhaps too late. But you spoke in time. It is your work. You were the good angel of my life. Alison—would it not be possible—could you ever consent to be my good angel always?—to walk beside me all my days, guiding me, counselling me, saving me? I sometimes feel as if my only hope of peace and safety lay in you.”

She moved backward a little, keeping her eyes upon my face.

“You ought not to say that, Stephen. Surely you have a higher guide.”

“Yes, yes, but you are the visible embodiment to me of all that is good. You make me feel stronger, better, when you are with me. Together always, what might we not do? And besides,” I said, a little more timidly, “I love you, Alison—”

She was readier-witted than I. “Is it only a ‘besides’?” she said, casting down her eyes and allowing a faint smile to curl her rosy lips.

“No, it is not a ‘besides’: it is the chief thing,”

I said; and then we both laughed light-heartedly, in spite of the fact that we were very serious and "earnest" young people; and she allowed me to kiss those pretty smiling lips. It was a happy moment: not perhaps of intoxicating bliss, but of quiet and tranquil happiness. We walked back to the house hand in hand like two children, gravely, but in perfect content. When we reached the door, she turned her face to me and I saw that it was more agitated than I had expected to see it: her cheeks were deeply flushed, her lips quivering, her eyes full of tears. We stood and looked at each other, and then she broke out with sudden passion,

"Oh, Steve, do you really love me?"

"Indeed I do, Alison." And I took her in my arms and kissed her again—more warmly this time: so warmly indeed that I think she was more than satisfied—she was even a little ashamed of her question. But I have wondered sometimes whether, even in those first moments, I did not fall short of the ideal lover of her dreams: whether I was not a trifle too reserved, too self-centred, thinking more of my own love and my own needs than of hers. Then, again, I console myself by remembering that that love of mine, poor though it was compared with that of which her stronger nature was capable,

was at least pure and sincere and full of reverence. If I could have married her then and there, I think she would have been, as I said, the saving angel of my life; but whether I should have had grace enough to make her happy, God only knows! Happiest of all would it have been for me, if I could have died there, that night in the moonlight, with Alison's kiss still warm upon my lips.

We agreed to say nothing about our "understanding" until my three years at College were over. There was nothing clandestine about this agreement in our judgment. Mr. Dart, as a minister, could not give his sanction to any definite engagement, so long as I was a mere student; but we did not anticipate any opposition from him when I had left College. Alison also considered herself in a sufficiently independent position to choose for herself. She was earning her own living as a teacher in one of the High Schools for girls which had then been only recently opened, and in her spare time she was working hard to pass examinations and take a London degree. She had had a good deal of freedom all her life, and did not mean to relinquish it in the matter of her choice of a husband. "They can object if they like, you know, because we are cousins,"

she said, looking full at me out of her beautiful dark eyes, "but they cannot make me give you up."

I have said little about Grace Dart all this while. There was not very much to say. She had been silently, solemnly pleased, if also, for some reason or other, apparently a little dazed—by my choice of a profession. She had no say—unless in private—at the family councils: she confined herself to attending to my physical necessities with the very greatest care. She made my linen, she knitted my socks, she stitched for me until the matron at the Training College lifted her hands in amaze over the delicacy of her needlework, and the piles of clothing that were the products of her industry. Perhaps she knitted and stitched and toiled her life away: at any rate, before I had long left home she began to dwindle and dwindle, and each time I returned I thought that she looked smaller and feebler than before. But she would not acknowledge that she was ill.

Alison and I, in tender concern for her, begged her to rest—to see a doctor, and to take care of herself; but to our surprise, we found that our persuasions were not seconded by Mr. and Mrs. Dart, who kept a curious silence when we spoke of Aunt Grace's weakness. Forced into speech at last, Uncle

Reuben remarked gravely that his sister had every care; while Aunt Maria, with some haste and nervousness, said that "Grace had suffered a good while, and if the Lord were to call her home it would hardly be for us to gainsay it."

Alison looked at me questioningly when we were again alone. "What is it? Has Aunt Grace some disease we do not know of?"

"We ought to be told," I said, rather indignantly. "Your father, Alison, seems fond of secrets."

"Of course he thinks he is acting for the best," said Alison, who always tried to be loyal to her parents, although they occasionally tried her patience, "but I am sure he is wrong about Aunt Grace. She ought to see a doctor."

But no doctor would Aunt Grace see, until the week before Alison and I both went back to our work. And then, in the damp autumn days, she caught a bad cold and was confined to her bed with a sharp attack of inflammation of the lungs. Alison nursed her assiduously—she was as clever at nursing as she was at her books—and before I left home Aunt Grace was reported to be out of danger and recovering, although still very weak.

It was my last night. I was to set off early next morning, and should not be back again until

Christmas. I had been up to say good-bye to her, and she had seemed fairly cheerful, showing me with half-mournful pride the pretty pair of silk socks (on the shining needles) which she had not been able to finish for me before I went away. But after supper Alison came for me again.

"I wish you would go to Aunt Grace," she said. "She is fretting—she always frets a little when you go away, she is so fond of you, you know, Steve! and if you went and coaxed her and petted her I think she would be better. Crying is bad for her while she is so weak."

I nodded and went upstairs at once. As Alison had said, the thin cheek turned to the pillow was wet with silent tears.

"Come, Auntie," I said, "don't be sad. Christmas will soon be here."

She put up one hand and laid it on my shoulder. "Is it you?" she said, half dreamily. "You—come back again? Stephen—Stephen—my love!"

Then, to my surprise, she burst into almost violent sobs and clung to me, uttering expressions of affection which came almost oddly from lips that were usually so silent. I soothed her as well as I was able, but it was long before she became calm. And then she began to apologise for her emotion.

"I'm rather weak just now, Stephen," she said tremulously. "And I think I was dreaming. You—you startled me."

"I am sorry for that. But you are better now?"

"Oh yes, I am better. I—I have loved you a great deal, Stephen; and I am always sorry when you go away. I have loved you almost like—a mother, I think. . . . And I believe you—you—have cared a little—for me."

There were curious breaks and changes in her voice. I smoothed back a lock of the soft, fair, greying hair that had strayed over her forehead from beneath the encircling white cap.

"Yes," I said softly; "I always cared for you very much, Aunt Grace. I—I was a motherless boy," I said, with a certain hesitation, "but I never felt so when I had you."

Her hand, still curved over the nape of my neck, as I leaned towards her, suddenly pressed itself against the flesh as if moved by an uncontrollable spasm of pain.

"You felt that?" she said, with a sort of gasp. "That I was—something to you? more than others? That I cared for you—only for you? Ah!"—with a sudden partial withdrawal of her hand—"I ought not to talk in this way to you. You know that I al-

ways cared for you, Stephen, do you not? That I loved you—better even than Alison; for Alison had her parents, and you—you had only me. None of them loved you but me.”

I bowed my head, but could not speak. I had never before felt so conscious of the fact of which she spoke—that neither Mr. Dart nor his wife had any affection for me. I felt a great softening of heart towards poor loving Aunt Grace. “Yes,” I said, with a sigh, “I had you; and I shall never forget how much you did for me.”

“You felt it too?” she said, tightening her hold on me, with a sort of excitement which I could not comprehend. “Oh, it was nature after all. God’s voice against man’s—and God’s voice always makes itself heard—I think we did wrong to try to silence it! Dear Stephen, I am talking very foolishly: I know I am puzzling you. But don’t think of what I say. I am weak and ill and—may I ask you something before you go?”

“*May* you, Aunt Grace? Ask anything you like, that I can do.”

“It is only a little thing,” she said nervously. “A fancy of mine. If you would but just—just once . . . you know you said I had been like a mother to you all your life . . . just let me hear how

it *sounds* to be called 'mother' . . . just call me *mother*, so that I may hear what it sounds like in your voice———”

“Why, that’s a little thing enough,” I said, with a half-embarrassed laugh, “*Mother!*—I have never said the word to any one before.”

“No,” she said softly, with a soothed, listening expression. “To no one else; no. It is a beautiful word.”

I sighed involuntarily, and as I sighed, the tranquil look vanished from her face. She took her arms away from my neck, and turned her cheek to the pillow: her lips fell, and although she closed her eyes I saw that they had grown wet. Thinking that I had wounded her by thus expressing a momentary sense of my great loss in life, I bent to kiss her and utter a few tender words.

“Nobody else could have had a better mother,” I said. “I wish you had been so in reality. Good-bye—mother.”

“Good-bye,” she said, “my son.”

She opened her eyes and looked at me—a strange ineffable light upon her face.

“My son,” she said once more.

I did not heed. I was deaf and blind—as all the young are deaf and blind to the agony of the

world. I had not suffered enough myself to understand anything that was not said to me in plain words.

But her look remained with me. Joy was in it, and grief; resignation, faith, an infinite renunciation, a profound despair. But I had not the key to its meaning: that was not put into my hands until a later day.

I kissed her again and left her, telling her to sleep. As I shut the door softly I saw my uncle standing on the landing, looking at me as I came out. It was perhaps the reflection of the lighted candle in his hand that gave such a strange gleam to his deep-set eyes. His face struck me as unusually pallid, and he seemed waiting for me to speak. "I have been saying good-bye to Aunt Grace," I observed, as much in my usual tone as possible. "She seems weak and nervous to-night, I won't disturb her in the morning."

To my surprise he did not answer. He swung himself violently round, and descended the stairs without a single word. He had come up in his stocking-feet, but the boards creaked under him as if he were not trying to move quietly any longer. He had rather the air of a spy, or a conspirator, who had been found out; and his manner so dis-

concerted me that I gazed after him until the last glimmer of his candle had disappeared in the depths of the darkened house below.

I started early next morning and did not see Aunt Grace again. Alison alone was present at my breakfast, and walked with me to the station. We made a compact about writing twice a week (neither of us had time for more frequent correspondence) and telling each other everything that happened to either of us; but I did not mention to her the strange talk that I had had with Aunt Grace. There seemed, on reflection, something so unusual, so strained about it, that I did not like to speak of it to Alison. I felt that she might possibly accuse us both of being weak and sentimental.

IV.

“As-tu réfléchi combien nous sommes organisés
pour le malheur?”

IV.

It was the end of November when I received one of Mr. Dart's rare letters, and I noted, with sudden misgiving, that the envelope was edged with black. It seemed to me that I had known beforehand what the missive contained. It was a curt statement of the fact that my uncle's sister Grace was dead, and a request that I would return home for the funeral, which was to take place on the day following the one on which I received the letter. I at once obtained leave of absence for this purpose, and reached home just in time to see the dear worn face again before the coffin lid was screwed down.

It seemed to me that the burial was being unduly hastened, and I asked my uncle why it was to take place so soon.

"There is no reason why it should be delayed," he said drily. "She had no friends who wanted to see her face in death, except ourselves. And there is no use in prolonging a period a mourning—so

called. Four days is a sufficient time. You forget that this is a minister's house, and it is inconvenient to keep it shut up longer than necessary."

I felt more than ever convinced that Reuben Dart had not loved his sister. At that moment I doubted whether he had ever loved any one at all. But there I was mistaken. He had loved Grace once, and he loved Alison still.

"You may speak of mourning *so called*, if you like," I said hoarsely, "but I loved her, and I mourn for her truly."

"Yes, that was why I sent for you," he answered unemotionally.

"And Alison," I proceeded. "Alison loved her too. I have not seen her yet—of course *she* is here?"

"No. I have not yet informed Alison of her aunt's death."

I darted a look of reproach at him. All the blood seemed to rush to my head in a sudden fury of protest. "I will telegraph to her," I cried. "Why, she would never forgive us for letting her stay away."

"I forbid you to telegraph," said my uncle, in his cold, relentless tones. "I shall write to her myself after the funeral. Wait till to-morrow and you will

understand my reasons. I do not want Alison here at present, and you must allow me, if you please, to be the judge of what is fitting for my daughter and what is not."

"Surely," I said hotly, "I have a right to be considered in the matter too. I have some claim to judge for Alison, since she has promised to become my wife."

Mr. Dart stood perfectly still, but a wave of passion suddenly turned his face livid, and convulsed it until it was almost unrecognisable. For a moment only, however. He would not speak, evidently, until he had got his passion well under control. When at last only a slight working of the lips and chin betrayed the extent to which he was still agitated, he made answer with quiet grimness—

"That she will never be."

I was about to make hot and hasty answer, when he checked me with a motion of his hand.

"It is not suitable," he said, "that we should wrangle while one so nearly related to us both lies upstairs in her coffin. To-morrow, after the funeral, we will again discuss this matter, if you desire to do so. Until then, I claim to be master in my own

house; and I say that I will not have Alison summoned."

I was obliged to be silent and submissive, although with a grudging heart. Alison, who had loved Aunt Grace from childhood almost as much as I had loved her myself—why should she not be bidden home to press with her lips that cold thin cheek, and to lay a few winter blossoms in those peacefully-folded hands? There was no one who seemed to care to hide the ugliness of death by offices of love. I vainly ransacked the garden and went to the solitary florist's shop for white and fragrant flowers, but none, to my disappointment, could be found. They would have had to be ordered beforehand, I was told. I was leaving the shop disconsolately, when an unexpected solace was afforded me. A stranger lady, who had heard my futile inquiries for sweet-scented flowers, was carrying a bouquet of fragrant violets—I think they must have come from abroad—and with a word of apology she placed them in my hand. She was gone before I had recovered from my surprise sufficiently to thank her. I never knew her name, but she was dressed in deep mourning, and I think she must have known sorrow or she would not have been so ready to feel for mine. Those sweet fragile blossoms were put

into Grace Dart's coffin and went with her to her grave. There were no other signs of love.

The day of the funeral was grey, cold, windy, with occasional showers of rain. The burial rites were few and simple. Two or three of the "Chapel people" were present—as a token of respect to Mr. Dart rather than to his sister, for few of them knew Aunt Grace even by sight; and the service was conducted by Mr. Dart himself. I followed as chief mourner—there was no one to mourn with me. Alison was away; and Aunt Maria had remarked that it was "not usual for the females of a family to attend funerals." So I walked alone, and listened with bowed head while my uncle read an abbreviated funeral service over his sister's grave.

The churchyard was green and quiet, but on that day to me all the world looked grey, and the "Dissenters' corner" was very bare and dreary. I was sorry to see that it was on the north side of the church, where the sunshine never came. I remembered the superstitious horror of the north side of the church that had been implanted in me as a child. A servant girl, walking with Alison and myself in a north-country town, had led us to the north side, and pointing to the rank, lush grass and sparsely-scattered mounds, told us that that space

was reserved for suicides and unbaptized babies. Her ignorant awe had infected me, and it was long before I got over the impression that the north side was a weird and an unholy place. I remembered the old superstition with a start as I saw where Aunt Grace would have to lie. I would have chosen any corner in the old churchyard for her but that. . . .

"Come with me, Stephen," said Mr. Dart, as the little party dispersed, and the gravedigger was shovelling clods into the grave. He took me by the arm, almost kindly as I now think, and led me away. The Chapel people had not been asked to return home with us. I scarcely noticed at first that my uncle was leading me into a quiet road which would not conduct us to his house. When we had walked for a little while, however, I said,

"Why have we come this way?"

"I wished to speak to you," he answered, "and I thought I could speak better out of the house than in. When we have had our talk we can go back. There are one or two things which it will now be better for you to know."

"Yes?" I said. I felt only a languid curiosity.

Mr. Dart did not believe in "breaking" bad news or softening down any painful communication. I

have heard him say so several times, and I believe it. On this occasion I think, however, that he had a real difficulty in coming to the point. He cleared his throat twice in a guttural way, and glanced at me doubtfully. Then he set his lips for a moment, and began.

"She," he said, with a backward twist of his head to the little green churchyard; "she—whom we have just buried—she was your mother."

"*What!*" I cried. We stopped short in the road and faced one another.

"Your mother. Yes."

"Aunt Grace—married?—I never knew——"

"Your mother was never married," said Mr. Dart stolidly. His complexion had assumed the purplish tint that it wore in moments of emotion; otherwise you would have said that he felt nothing as he made his statement. "But you are her child."

I began to understand. There was a white gate in the road: I staggered towards it and leaned against the bars. The world went round: there was a darkness before my eyes and a singing in my ears. I felt suffocated: I began to hope that I was going to die. But after a few moments' misery, followed by a second or two—I think—of blank unconsciousness—I came to myself, and found my uncle supporting

me under the arm with a look of mingled astonishment and terror upon his face. He had grown so used to the knowledge of his sister's secret, that he had under-estimated the effect which its communication would produce upon my mind.

"Better?" he said, releasing my arm. "I thought you had more strength, Stephen. Shall we postpone the rest of our conversation?"

"No," I stammered, confused yet, and hardly knowing how to frame my words. "I had better hear it all—now."

"I have nothing particular to tell," said Mr. Dart shortly. "That is the one fact that I was to impart to you on my misguided sister's death."

"But why was I not told before?"

"Your mother"—how terrible the word had grown!—"feared for you to know. She expressed herself as feeling that she would be unable to look you in the face again when once you had heard her story. With that inaccuracy and exaggeration to which her sex is ever prone, she declared that a glance of disdain from your eye would kill her. I think I may safely say," pursued Mr. Dart deliberately, "that she sorrowed very sincerely for her sin, and was truly penitent before she died. I have

every reason to believe that she had washed her sins away in———”

I broke in abruptly, excitedly. “She was a saint,” I said. “Don’t talk to me about her ‘sin.’ It is an outrage. She may have been deceived, betrayed—I will believe nothing else.” I was leaning with my elbows on the topmost rail of the gate: I put up my hands and pressed my eyelids down over my burning eyes—even the [dim green landscape seemed too bright.

“You are not master of yourself just now; you had better not speak,” said Mr. Dart gravely. “I wish I could spare you the relation of this sad story. But she enjoined it upon me to tell you as soon as she was laid in the grave. In listening calmly, therefore, you will be acting as she wished you to act.”

I restrained myself. I listened to the story, told as it was in Mr. Dart’s grating accents and with Mr. Dart’s unsympathetic comments. And listening, I understood for the first time what tragedy lay beneath the commonplace decorum of my mother’s outer life.

There is no use in calling it anything but a miserably commonplace little story. Grace Dart had been a nursery-governess in a large house. One of the visitors, attracted by her pretty face, had scraped

acquaintance with her, persuaded her to leave the house with him, and had deserted her when she was likely to have a child. She had wandered back to her brother's house in sad condition; and her brother, in spite of his apparent rigidity and harshness, had not repulsed her. There was a leaven of true charity in the man and in his wife. They had provided lodgings and attendance for Grace; and after her child was born they had taken her and the babe to live with them, on condition that she was never to call herself my mother, but was to treat me as a nephew, the son of a brother who was dead. They had been so careful to keep her in seclusion during her trouble, and, as she was young and obscure, so little was known about her outside her brother's house that they were able to carry out their plan successfully. The shortness of their stay in the towns where Mr. Dart was stationed also helped them. Nobody questioned the genuineness of the minister's story—implied rather than stated—that he had adopted his brother's child, and that his only sister, Miss Grace Dart, had come to live with them and help his wife in her household duties. It all sounded innocent and probable enough, and redounded to his credit. The breath of scandal had never tarnished Grace's name since she entered her brother's door.

"Did no one know?" I asked.

"I took counsel with one or two tried and trusty friends alone," said my uncle. "Father Spring—you will remember him—was one. He is now dead. Another or two remain: I conceived it my duty to lay the matter before the Chairman of the District; but the friends whom I consulted, while deprecating concealment of the truth, for the most part approved my action."

"Then there are men—men whom I have met—who know all about me—who I am?" I asked brokenly.

Mr. Dart nodded. "Assuredly. Such things cannot be hidden altogether. It was a matter that had to be taken into consideration when you offered yourself for the ministry."

"If I had known, I never should have offered myself," I said with passionate bitterness. The notion that my case had been discussed by Mr. Dart's friends, that my mother had been shamed in the eyes of men who had afterwards gathered to hear me pray and preach aloud in all the glory of my young self-conceit, rendered me suddenly desperate. "You should have prevented it—you should have told me all."

"I thought so, but I was to some extent over-

ruled," said Mr. Dart. "It seemed that you had talents—of a kind; and it was considered a pity to run the risk of disheartening you. You are now old enough to accept the position and to live down its disadvantages."

I said nothing: I leaned against the gate again, and let him go on with his tale.

There was a side to it which the godly ministers who had debated on her case and mine were never called upon to take into consideration. Even they perhaps would have shrunk from meting out to her the slow torture that must have fallen to her lot. She had never for a moment cast off her faith, or doubted the deadly sinfulness of her deed. Her whole life, from the moment when she crossed her brother's threshold to the day, nearly twenty-two years later, when she died in his house, was a patient expiation of that sin. No slight, no privation, no toil, could be too much for her. She must have had a certain sort of satisfaction in working beyond her strength, in laying herself out to suffer. And then the Darts did not make her life morally or religiously easier for her. Mr. Dart prayed with her and exhorted her periodically; and if I know anything of my poor mother's nature, I am certain that these pastoral visitations must have been so much flaying alive.

Then Mrs. Dart did not refrain from occasional allusions (in private) to the past. The poor woman must have lived in a sort of penitentiary for the rest of her life.

“And my father?” I asked, when Mr. Dart had finished outlining the story. I may mention, in passing, that Mr. Dart was troubled by no misgivings of conscience as to the righteousness of his way of dealing with his sister. In essentials, he had indeed been thoroughly kind and charitable; but he was of too coarse a fibre to understand how keenly he must have made her suffer.

“I know nothing of him,” my uncle replied.

“You know his name?”

Mr. Dart looked away. “His first name was Stephen: I know so much. I am sorry to say that my sister would not tell me his surname, possibly lest I should be tempted to make accusations or ask for pecuniary help—a thing which I need hardly tell you I should never have contemplated. All that I can tell you is that he was a rich man of what is called ‘good family’; that he had tastes for art and music, of which I have been grieved at times to see evidences in yourself, and that he was somewhat like yourself in face and figure, though taller and more comely. The name of the house where she was em-

ployed was Vauston Towers: I believe that this man was related to the proprietor——”

I felt a strange sickness creep over me as I listened. For a moment I grappled with the thought of seeking out my unknown father and forcing him upon his knees to beg for the mercy which he had refused to show to others. A hitherto unknown fierceness possessed me when I thought of him. The impossibility of identifying him deadened my forces, and turned me faint with disappointment.

Whither had my religious principles vanished? you will ask. Certainly they had no hold upon me then. I was utterly dominated by animal passions: by the lust of revenge, of desire for blood. If I could have met the unknown father who had first wronged my mother and then condemned her to more than twenty years of perpetual suffering and denial, while he went softly, faring delicately, and wearing the modern equivalent for purple and fine linen every day, I would gladly have strangled the life out of him, or felled him to the earth so that he should never rise again. Such passions are in all of us, I suppose, but in many quiet folk they are never called into play. It is one of the counts in my indictment against this unknown father of mine that

he made me know how nearly I could be a murderer! These elemental passions are not good for us: they make us feel ourselves too much allied with Mother Earth and the baser nature of the brute.

“And so you see,” said Mr. Dart at last, “why I would not ask Alison to come home to-day. It was not right or fitting that she—a pure, unstained maiden—should assist at the burial of—a Magdalen.”

“Ah no,” I answered bitterly, “a Magdalen might sit beside Christ’s sepulchre and be one of the first to whom He appeared when He was risen from the dead; but Alison would be defiled by contact with such as they!”

“You speak wildly, Stephen; but I can make allowances for your present state of mind. When you are calmer you will see that what I say is true—both as respects the funeral and her entanglement with you. You must see that I cannot possibly desire my daughter to marry a young man of your antecedents. Marry, if you can, where you are not known; but do not come and take my Alison from me!”

The ring of strong feeling in his voice impressed me. I took my arms down from the gate, and

moved forward a pace or two. I felt myself answering dully, as if I had no spirit to speak outright.

"I will try to do what is right—to you and Alison too. I can say no more just now. There are other things, no doubt; but just now I am incompetent. You must bear with me, sir: I have had a shock—I scarcely know what I ought to say or do."

"We had better be getting home," said Mr. Dart. "I will leave the matter to your good sense, Stephen. I am truly sorry for your position, and will do all in my power to ameliorate it. But I will not give you my daughter."

And after these words we tramped home in silence.

It would be almost impossible to give any adequate notion of my state of mind that night. The thing scarcely bears talking about. My brain must have been in a whirl, for I do not remember any of the ordinary incidents of life: eating, sleeping, talking, were all alike intolerable and impracticable. I believe I walked about my room for hours, and spent the greater part of the night in the room where my poor mother had died. Here I

found memorials of her life which pierced me to the heart. There was a photograph of myself: there were the little presents that I had sometimes sent her: there were her devotional books—Bible, hymn book, *Imitation* (Wesley's edition), and volume of Spurgeon's sermons. Inside the four books I found my own name faintly written in pencil beneath her own.

If there had been any coldness or hardness in my heart towards her, that little legacy would have melted it. The tears came to my eyes and a rush of tenderness followed them. But of those moments, even at this distance of time, I do not care to speak. . . .

I went back to College next morning, carrying with me the few relics of which I was allowed to possess myself. There was no pretext for lingering. Mr. and Mrs. Dart were well pleased, I think, to get rid of me so soon. I sat down with them to breakfast, but I could neither eat nor drink. My uncle looked at me from time to time in a kind of perplexity; Aunt Maria kept up a flow of trivial talk of which I did not hear one word. I believe, from the expression of her face, that I interrupted her in the very middle of a sentence, by rising

from the table and suddenly addressing myself to Mr. Dart.

"I wish to thank you," I said in a voice that seemed to me strangely unlike my own, "for the kindness you have shown me all my life: the charity to my mother and myself. I wish I could pay it back; but that is impossible. All I can do is to take myself away."

Mrs. Dart stared: her husband suddenly changed colour.

"You are going to College, of course," he said, less confidently than usual, "but we shall see you back again in a month—at Christmas time?"

"Thank you, no," I answered. I had not thought of any plans for the future until he spoke, but they suddenly started into being at the question. "I need not inflict myself on you so much now that *she* is gone. I have an invitation from a friend for Christmas: I shall probably accept it."

"But Alison———" Mrs. Dart began, unmindful of her husband's frown.

"Alison will not want to see me," I said. "Alison will probably never want to see me nor hear from me again." My eyes met my uncle's desperately: I saw that he looked afraid. "I am going to throw Alison over," I said. "I am going to jilt Alison, do

you hear, sir? If you like to bring the matter before the quarterly meeting you can do so. I daresay you could get me expelled for it—and then I should be no longer in your way.”

I replied to his secret dislike of me, of which I had suddenly and as if by instinct become aware, not to anything in his previous speech or conduct; and my words therefore sounded more insolent than they were meant to be. At the same time, to behave as I was then minded to do—to give Alison up without apparent reason after I had made her an offer of marriage—would in some circumstances have positively brought about expulsion from the Society or very serious disgrace; cases of this sort were severely dealt with, as tending to bring “the ministry” into disrepute. But to suppose that Mr. Dart would imperil the family secret in order to bring me to punishment was a wanton insult which I can only justify by an allusion to my smarting sense of his hatred to me as the visible sign of a great disgrace.

The outburst gave him an instant advantage. He rose to his feet and waved his hand. “You must be dreaming,” he said contemptuously. “I have already said that I will not permit your engagement to Alison. It is I who break it off; not

you. Young man, is this the way in which you repay us for the kindness with which you say we have treated you and—your mother?”

“He has bad blood in him,” said Mrs. Dart, in a shriller voice than usual. “What can you expect?”

I hung my head: I was already ashamed. “I beg your pardon, uncle,” I said humbly. “I hardly know what I am saying to-day. I did not mean to be ungrateful.”

“But you are ungrateful for all that,” said he bitterly. “You have brains, I know; talent in plenty: God grant that you never turn it to evil purposes. But as your aunt truly says, you have bad blood in you. You come of a bad stock, and you have shown the signs of it all your life. As a child you were deceitful and disobedient; as a boy, shifty and idle; as a young man, vain, arrogant, presumptuous, ungrateful. It may be that the Lord means yet to discipline you into some likeness to Himself: if so, you have still much suffering and sorrow before you; but I say to you, young man, that you will have cause to bless God, be His chastisements never so severe, if at last, in spite of all your drawbacks and propensities, they lead you to Himself.”

He turned his back upon me: my doom was

spoken. For the moment I felt stunned, crushed: this opinion of my character and my fate was hard to bear. At last I simply said in a low voice—

“You are right, sir, in one thing: I shall have cause to bless God if He leads me to Himself, as I trust in time that He will do.”

And then I went out of the room, without looking back.

He had added another wound to those from which I was suffering already. My mother's history, with the heritage of sorrow which she had left me, had smitten me sorely; the loss of Alison was rending my very heart-strings. It seemed a cruel thing to be also pierced through with distrust in oneself, in one's own integrity and honesty of purpose. And the worst part of the hurt lay in a little hidden doubt of my own as to whether he had not spoken truth. It was always hard to me to believe in my own sincerity. There always seemed to be some mocking fiend—some second self—in the background, that questioned the reality of my most ardent moments. If I have ever thrown myself into extremes, it has been in the endeavour to escape from this mocking monitor of mine. But it had scarcely taken shape—or at least I had not recognised its

existence—until it spoke to me in Reuben Dart's harsh tones and looked at me out of Reuben Dart's incredulous, sorrowful, angry eyes. Thus confronted by it, I shuddered and shrank back. The inner voice confirmed Reuben Dart's opinion of me. I was too weak, too wicked, too unutterably infirm, ever to take the place that had been designed for me, or at which, I now bethought me, I had impotently snatched. For the first time it seemed to me an impossible thing that I should ever try to teach my fellow-men.

I went back to College because I had nowhere else to go. And besides, I could not all at once gauge the extent of my depression and misery. I thought it just possible after all that things should look better by and by. And it was a relief to get back to my books.

One of my first duties was to write a letter to Alison. I made it as short as I could. To her I daresay it seemed a cruel letter, but it almost broke my heart to write it.

“DEAR ALISON—Your father refuses to consent to our marriage, and I cannot but feel that he is in the right. In my

position, I am no fit mate for you. Put me out of your thoughts, then, and choose a worthier man. I shall never marry.

“STEPHEN.”

It was bald, crude, and weak. I had no power left in me to do better. Alison answered vehemently, impetuously, on sheets of closely-written paper, urging me to be brave, to believe in her love, to battle for her if not for myself. But I was too much sunk in apathy and bewilderment to answer the letter. When one day I woke up to the realities of life, to a belief in myself and a hope in the future, I re-read her letter and saw, as by a flash of lightning, all that it might have meant. But then it was too late.

I was not positively ill; but I was quite unable to work. How I got through the rest of my term at College I cannot tell. I had had a good character for industry, and this sudden relaxation of my efforts took everybody by surprise. The authorities were lenient, even indulgent: some rumour of the truth had, I doubt not, reached their ears; they let me do pretty much as I would for the next few weeks, and did not urge me to take the preaching appointments which had hitherto been a great pleasure to me, but which had now become a terror

and a disgust. One of the masters tried hard to win my confidence and to encourage me, but the time for confidence had not come yet, and I repelled all his advances.

My friend Egerton, who had invited me to spend the Christmas holidays with him, now renewed his solicitations. I told him that I was ill, that I had lost a friend, and that my engagement was broken off—good reason for my depression of spirits—but he only begged me the more earnestly to go down with him to his father's house. Weary of refusing, I one day burst out with some approach to the truth.

“You don't know my history, Egerton. I've only just found it out myself. There's a stain—a stain on my birth—I never knew it before——”

“My dear fellow, what does that matter to me?” said Egerton—uttering the first words of common sense and healthful reasoning that I had heard on the subject. “I want you and not your ancestors. So that is what you have been brooding over! Come, pull yourself together, and let's have no more morbid fits. We are as God makes us, and we have no business to look behind. I shall turn my father on to you—he's the best man I know,

although he does not belong to our body. You will come down with me on Tuesday."

I yielded: I was in the mood when I should have yielded to any strong pressure from without; and it would have been difficult to oppose resistance at any time to Egerton's genial and large-hearted determination.

V.

“From change to change unceasingly.”

V.

My visit to Egerton's home was an epoch in my life.

My friend, Charles Egerton, was by no means a man of the old-fashioned type. Since those days he has risen to considerable eminence as a leader of "the new school" in the sect to which we both belonged, not only on account of his mental vigour, but because of a breezy, healthful personality which seemed to infuse vitality into others whithersoever he went. Save on a theory of opposites, I can imagine no reason for his friendship for me. I was shy, sensitive, unused to the world, a dreamer and an egotist: he was utterly guiltless of self-consciousness or of selfishness in any form. He was extremely sympathetic and somewhat enthusiastic by nature; and I think that he had an undue estimation of characteristics which were unlike his own. There was some sort of surface-likeness between

him and my old friend Allan Herrick; but Allan was rapidly developing, as I saw from his occasional letters, into a full-fledged agnostic—a hard-headed, scientific materialist, absorbed in his phials and his bacteria; while Egerton was on fire with belief, and although not ignorant of science, disposed to do battle with what he called its materialising tendency. I longed to see the two engaged on some day in a sharp fight of their respective opinions.

Egerton was unlike most of the men who were with me at College in that he did not come from a Methodist family. He had fallen under the influence of an eloquent evangelistic preacher of our persuasion while he was a boy of eighteen, and had very quickly made up his mind that he would become a Wesleyan minister. His father put no obstacle in his way; and when he was twenty he had come to our College, although he might have dispensed with all but our theological courses, as he was already far more advanced in his studies than some of the men when they left us; but it was a part of his father's plan for him that he should go through the regular round of training. He had been well educated and would probably have made a mark for himself if he had gone out into the world; but religious enthusiasm is still sufficiently

strong among us to cause some men to despise that kind of distinction, and I think Charles Egerton would have been contented to spend his life in preaching to country yokels, or to wear out his days beneath a tropic sun in "the Mission Field," if it had seemed good to the authorities that such should be his fate.

I was not at all prepared for the kind of home to which he took me. I had heard that his father was a minister, and I pictured vaguely to myself the life, the house, of a minister after my uncle's fashion: a narrow, pinched life, a small and common-looking residence in a smoky town, a routine of trivial duties and conventionalised religion. For Mr. Dart had never obtained an advantageous position in his own circle. He was not a clever or an agreeable man; neither was he a good preacher; and possibly his domestic relations hampered him. At any rate, he had always held an inferior place, and received a small stipend: he was one of the obscure men who gain no credit and receive no notice. Now Dr. Egerton, of the great commercial city of Anchester, where he had been resident for five-and-thirty years, was not only the well-known pastor of a wealthy Independent Church, but a power in the place—a social, political, ecclesiastical power, with influence

and authority such as falls to very few men outside the pale of the Established Church. He had a big, comfortable, well-appointed house in the suburbs, entertained largely, and was remarkable for his kindness and generosity to young men, especially to those who had religious difficulties or were in want of means to carry on their education. I had no idea of it at the time, but Charles Egerton had carried me down to his father's house with a purpose. He saw that I was unhappy, and believed that his father's counsel would be good for me. He had unlimited faith in his father's wisdom and goodness, although he himself had chosen to go a different way in life. But it was part of the beauty and sweetness of Dr. Egerton's character that it should seem perfectly natural to him that Charles should go one way and he another—even in theology.

Dr. Egerton was what used to be called a universalist; he held liberal and advanced views on such subjects as the inspiration of Scripture and the fall of man—things that I had before scarcely ever heard called in question by religious men. But it was long before the difference between Dr. Egerton's views and my own struck me. I was in no mood for argument. I was bruised, sore, and shaken; and I found more comfort in the perfect quiet of

the doctor's study than in discussion of theological subtleties, or even in listening to the lively chatter and the music that went on in the drawing-room. There was a large family of sons and daughters, amongst whom Charles came half-way; and there was a kindly, placid house-mother, who did her best to shield me beneath her wing when the high spirits of the young people seemed about to be too much for me. There was a general impression that I was ill, and that I had passed through some terrible trouble; and although nobody knew what the trouble was (for Charlie kept his own counsel), it procured me a vast amount of deference and respect from these kindly-natured folk.

"That young fellow looks sadly broken, Charlie," I accidentally heard the doctor say to his son one day. "I don't like to see such a look of trouble on so young a face. I wish I could do anything to help him."

It was this speech, as much as anything else, which caused me one day to throw myself and my troubles on the doctor's compassion. I see him still, as he sat in his study-chair, listening to my story; his elbows on the arms of the chair, the tips of his fingers gently laid together, his snowy head a little

bent, his fine features expressive only of grave attention and sympathy. I told him my whole history, and wound up by declaring passionately that nothing would induce me now to go on with my studies at College—that I would sooner serve again in a grocer's shop than become a minister. I remember that he tried to sift my reasons for this determination, the reasons seeming doubtless sufficiently flimsy to him.

“Have you forgotten,” he said, “that you have already received more than two years of training at the expense of the sect to which you belong? How can you honestly, from mere personal feeling, throw that training away?”

I was silent for a moment. This view of the case had not occurred to me.

“I have no money,” I said despairingly; “but I would work—I would bind myself to pay back all expenses in a term of years.”

The doctor shook his head. “That would hardly be considered satisfactory. Then—do you understand that you virtually declare your call to the ministry to have been a delusion? For if you ever received it, you are bound to be faithful to it at any cost to your personal feeling.”

“I had thought,” I said slowly, “that I might work in other ways. There is nothing else that I

care for—nothing. But to go in and out amongst these men who knew my story all the time—” I broke off shuddering: the prospect seemed unbearable to me.

Dr. Egerton bent his brows. “You are very weak, Stephen,” he said gravely. “Weak and morbid, I fear. But such defects as yours can be conquered in time. We must see what we can do to help you. Then I understand that you have no desire to give up the calling that you had chosen—you have simply a dislike to exercising it among people who may possibly know your origin? But, my dear boy, you cannot destroy that knowledge by ceasing to be a candidate for their ministry. You will only be talked about more than ever. And why should you make so great a trouble of what is after all so small a thing? We honour men for what they are, not for what their parents have been.”

I was silent: it seemed indeed that there was no way of escape. After a long pause, I tried to answer the doctor.

“Of course I see that you are right, sir. I am a coward. I’ll go back, and try—try to live it down.” And then my strength failed me; I buried my face in my hands and sobbed aloud.

The doctor put his hand kindly on my head.

"No, you are not a coward, Stephen; you are a brave man, about to fight down the devils of pride and stubbornness; and you will conquer yet."

It was my submission that made Dr. Egerton my friend. I had clearly been wrong; but to see and acknowledge wrong-doing was a veritable passport to that good man's heart. From that day forward he was ready to treat me as if I were his son. And, cheered by his encouragement, I made up my mind, although with fear and trembling, to go back to the College with Egerton, and take up my work manfully once more.

But this was not to be—through no fault, I thank God, of my own. On the day before the end of the vacation I sickened of typhoid fever, complicated with some brain disturbance which had arisen out of my past misery; and then for many a long week I lay between life and death.

The Egertons would not allow me to be taken away. With the help of a professional nurse, they tended me themselves, and brought me back at last to a tardy convalescence. Words cannot express their goodness to me. I was treated as a child of the house: for the first time in my life I was petted

and made much of by a kindly woman, and encouraged to find pleasure in the smaller amenities of civilised existence. I had flowers, fruit, delicate food, new books, pictures and music; the companionship of refined and educated people. It was like a new life—almost like a dream of Paradise.

I learned afterwards that Dr. Egerton had communicated with the College authorities and with my uncle and aunt, thus obtaining full permission to deal with me as he chose. Mr. and Mrs. Dart declared that they desired no further intercourse with me, and absolutely refused permission to Alison (who pleaded for it with tears) to visit me. Alison would possibly have gone without their permission if Dr. Egerton had not kindly but firmly upheld the authority of her parents. And then, before I myself was strong again, the news came that Mr. Dart had had a fit of apoplexy and died after a few hours' illness. Mrs. Dart was thus left alone in the world, save for Alison, and Alison had offered her a home. After the following August (up to which date Mrs. Dart was permitted to reside in "the minister's house"), the mother and daughter would live together. Whether Alison and I would ever be reconciled, now that one great obstacle to our union had been removed, it was as yet impossible to say. She

wrote to me sometimes, but simply as a friend and sister. And it was as a friend and sister that I—rather to my own consternation—found that I now regarded her.

A long illness sometimes works marvellous changes in the tastes and the affections. I came back to life a new man. I had no ambition to distinguish myself by pulpit eloquence, and I lacked the vigour for hard physical work. I was not strong enough to go back to College until too late for the summer term; so I stayed at Dr. Egerton's and became his secretary and amanuensis for a time. And here, almost without noticing the change, I began to assimilate ideas and doctrines which would have seemed to me like the wildest heterodoxy in days of yore. I studied Dr. Egerton's works and those of his compeers; and the more I read, the more it became exceedingly clear to me that the old Methodist doctrines had lost their hold upon me, and that although I had by no means given up the Christian faith, I was holding some of its tenets with a much looser hand than heretofore. Altogether I began to doubt whether I had the right to enrol myself among the ministers of the sect in which I had been brought up; and this doubt made me miserable.

For Dr. Egerton's suggestion that I was bound in common honesty to put to its original uses the training that I had received at the Theological College weighed very heavily upon my mind.

But while I mused and meditated and brooded over my future and my past, the doctor was observing me and drawing his own conclusions. Before the beginning of the autumn term he had a long talk with me; and, without probing too far, or seeking to know my views too definitely, he made me a proposition. If I did not wish to become a Methodist minister, he would smooth my way to a different career. He would mediate between me and the College people, and would refund a sum which would cover my past expenses. This sum I could repay to him at my leisure. And he offered me a post as sub-librarian at a large institution in Anchester, with a further office of helping him in some literary work, "if I would submit," as he phrased it, "to the bonds of residence in his house for a while longer, as he had no mind to part with me just yet."

The offer was as flattering as it was welcome. I accepted it with the greatest delight and gratitude.

And for three years I lived and worked in the doctor's house, with growing reverence for the man who had come to my aid in my distress, and with growing interest in the literary work that he had at heart. This work was almost entirely theological: it has since been published in two large octavo volumes, and is to be found in every library. I myself think it a most valuable work; and yet, when I look at it on the library shelves, I sometimes feel as if it had the characteristic of some blood-sucking monster; for it stole the vigour from its author's failing days, and it made three years of my life a blank to me, as far as the world of men and women is concerned. I lived among books, and thought of nothing else. And at the end of the three years the dear old doctor died; and I was once more set adrift.

The doctor left me a sum of money, and a recommendation to try for a perpetual post as librarian or secretary. But, curiously enough, I had reverted in part to my old tastes. I had always had the preaching instinct: there is nothing so persistent, I believe, in human nature. I felt that I should like to hand on the traditions of pure doctrine, of faith in the unseen, which I had received from my dear

old friend. In *his* gospel I believed with all my soul. It was not a gospel breathing flame and damnation; it was the good tidings of purity, peace, and love. I wanted to speak to my fellow-creatures of the beauty of holiness, and the exquisite joys of the love of Christ. I dreamed of a world where all men were brothers, and were won by love to the highest ideal of a noble life; I had words to say to my brothers about the gentleness of Christ's character, the nobility of His example, the stainless purity of His life; and I believed that I could do good to the world by saying these things. My old morbidness of feeling had worn off; I could better estimate the small importance which, after, all, attaches to any one man's story; and I was not afraid now of facing a congregation or letting my voice be heard. My resolution was soon taken; I would become an Independent minister, and I had no doubt but that a church would soon be offered to me.

I had little difficulty in carrying out my intention. I was now known to a large circle of friends, through my connection with Dr. Egerton; and the sum of money that he had left me was sufficient to cover all preliminary expenses. In a few months, then, I was "ordained," and in a short time I re-

ceived my first invitation or "call" to a pastorate. I was a little disappointed to receive only one; but I did not like to wait on the chance of another. My funds were low, and I did not wish to appeal to my friends for help. The "call" came from a small country town on the borders of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. The stipend was not large, but the invitation was cordial, and the trial visit was pleasant and satisfactory. I went when the fruit-trees were in blossom, and the gardens were one mass of bloom; the sunshine streamed pleasantly on the quaint little town, with its sleepy-looking river, its old grey bridge, its market-place, paved with cobblestones, its imposing church and handsome new town-hall. I have often thought that if I had seen Lynn-bridge as I have many times seen it since—soaking wet with the continual rain for which it is almost notorious, with half the fields under water, and the lower-lying houses half swamped from the river-floods, I should hardly have accepted the charge of its Congregational Chapel. One end of the town was a nest for fever and ague, and nearly all the elderly men in the parish were crippled by rheumatism. Not that these facts would have deterred me; but I mean to say that I was mistaken when I imagined the place to be an abode of peace and

beauty, where I should be free to pass my time in quiet study and to mature my powers for some wider sphere of usefulness by and by. Lynnbridge in the sunshine looked a pleasant place to dwell in; and I accepted the "call" of its congregation with tranquil anticipation of a peaceful and honourable life. Not that I meant to stay in Lynnbridge for ever; but a few years, I thought, might be passed there with advantage.

Had I known what Lynnbridge held for me—what a future of torture and degradation, as well as the most bewildering ecstasy of my life—should I have turned away? Or would the seed of evil, already sown in me, have sprung into sudden growth and overshadowed the feebler shoots of good? I cannot tell. I am bound to believe that God guided me; but in my darker hours, I sometimes wonder why we were ever told to pray that He would not lead us into temptation when He does so every day.

But before I settled down at Lynnbridge, I resolved to see my cousin Alison and her mother once again. I travelled up to London and presented myself at their house without announcing my visit beforehand. I was not quite certain as to what my

reception would be; for I knew that Mrs. Dart felt very bitterly towards me, on account of my rupture with the Methodist Connection. Alison was still teaching in a school at Clapham. She earned a good income; and as Mrs. Dart had also the annuity to which a preacher's widow is entitled, the mother and daughter had been able to take a small house in a quiet street, where they lived in comfort together. Mrs. Dart was now something of an invalid, and rarely left the house; she was a good deal alone, as Alison was out nearly all the day, and perhaps that made her fretful. At any rate I soon noticed that she was more snappish than she used to be, and Alison, though persistently cheerful, had a weary look which her face had never worn in days of old. It was more than five years since we had met.

There was no difficulty about receiving me. She and her mother seemed to take my coming as a matter of course.

"I thought we should be seeing you now that the old doctor was gone," Mrs. Dart remarked, with rather an offensive intonation. "I hope you have got something to do."

"Yes, thank you," I replied. "I am now a Congregational minister, and have accepted a call to Lynnbridge in Lincolnshire."

"Oh, indeed? I did think your coat looked rather like a minister's. But you don't wear a white tie. Ah well, I'm sure I hope you will go on steadily and satisfactorily *now*, Stephen. Remember what Mr. Dart said to you when he saw you last. You have got bad blood in you, and you come of a bad stock; I doubt it will take a deal of grace to get the evil strain out of you."

"Mother, how can you say such things?" said Alison, her face aflame. "We ought to be proud of Stephen and of all that he has done."

"There is a great deal of truth in what your mother says, Alison," I said firmly. "But still, if she believes in the grace of God at all, she no doubt believes that evil *can* be conquered, in spite of any difficulty in the way."

Mrs. Dart was silenced; but her weapon had had a poisoned edge for me. She had touched on the point which was always starting up afresh in my mind; the question as to whether evil *was* conquerable or not. I inclined, after a long course of Dr. Egerton's teaching, to believe that it was; but I was sensitive on the point, and avoided as much as possible any discussion on matters connected with heredity. Unfortunately it was a subject to which one was constantly hearing allusions—all tending in

one direction. That, as physical characteristics descended from parent to child, so mental and moral traits were inherited. And that my own chances of leading a worthy and lofty life were minimised—it was the thought that lay curled like a serpent in my heart—by the failures and sins of the parents who had begotten me. Usually I ignored the thought; it was one which, in my position, I felt I could not bear; but a chance word would rouse it into activity, and Mrs. Dart's assault seemed to give it double strength. I knew that it would take me a week or two, now that it had been called up, to get it into the background of my mind again.

But Alison, seeing the gloom that involuntarily overspread my face, set to work to make us cheerful, and began to tell funny tales of her pupils, and to question me about my experiences in Anchester. After tea she took me—by her mother's request, and with a little reluctance on her part—into the garden; and there, while we inspected the roses and geraniums, I put a question which had long been present to my mind.

“Alison, would it be possible for you to forgive me?”

“I have nothing to forgive, Stephen.”

“Then will you—can you—after all—consent to be my wife?”

She looked at me for a moment in complete silence. She was a very handsome woman, but, young as she was, there were lines about her eyes and mouth, and grey streaks in her hair. But her colour was as fresh and her lips as rosy as ever; which meant, perhaps, that though she had suffered in her time, her vigorous constitution had gained the day and repaired as far as possible the ravages made by pain. This was the thought that passed through my mind, as she faced me in the evening light.

“No,” she said calmly at last, “not now, Stephen dear. But I am glad—for one thing—that you have asked me: it shows that you have surmounted the fanciful barrier that you once placed between us. And I do not think that your heart is very much set upon winning me—although you have asked me to be your wife!” She smiled as she spoke.

“I have thought of nothing else for a long time, Alison. I have a sufficient income; and you should not be separated from your mother: she should come with us, if you liked——”

“Ah, Stephen, don’t! No, it can never be.”

“Then you do think—as your mother does—that there is some hidden evil in me——”

"Dear Stephen! indeed I think nothing of the kind. I am sorry you harp on that—sorry that my mother has so wounded you. Forgive her, and forgive me, dear, and believe that I think of you most highly; but the time for anything else has gone by."

"I wore out your love by my weakness, I suppose," I said a little sadly, "but indeed——"

My sentence had to be broken off, for at that moment Alison started, coloured, and turned hurriedly towards the house. A young man, with a keen, handsome face and a pleasant smile, came out through the tiny conservatory which formed the entrance to the back garden. "Good evening," he called from the door. "May I come too? I see that Stephen has quite forgotten me."

His manner rather than his face or voice recalled my old friend to me. "Allan!" I exclaimed.

He came forward, holding out his hand, but there was a slight want of cordiality in the way his keen eyes scanned me from head to foot. "I should have known you anywhere," he said easily; "it's the same face exactly."

"Are you living in London?" I asked.

"Yes, I have a practice in this neighbourhood. My father retired, and I was a little tired of the old grooves—though not of the old friends"—and his

eyes sought Alison's with a momentary smile—"so I thought I would try my luck in town."

"I hope you are successful?"

"Pretty well, thanks. Oh yes, I've nothing to complain of," said Allan, with the assured air of a man who has paid his footing at the board of life.

"And you? Turned parson after all, I hear?"

My aunt had been beforehand with the news, it seemed.

"Stephen has accepted a charge in Lincolnshire," said Alison. "Lynnbridge—a country place."

Allan raised his eyebrows. "I thought you would have liked to get nearer the heart of things," he said, giving me another of his keen glances. "But you look a little fagged; I suppose you want a quiet time for a bit, then—hey for the Metropolis?"

"I want a quiet time certainly. I do not know what I shall do next," I said with some reserve.

"Lynnbridge. Where have I heard that name? Oh, I know. A patient of my father's has gone to live there. You may remember Dolly speaking of her, Alison? Miss Forster, daughter of the organist who died. She became companion to a lady somewhere, and there married a man a good many years older than herself, and went to live at Lynnbridge."

"I don't remember," said Alison doubtfully. "Was she very delicate?"

"Neurotic," said Allan slightly. "Not much the matter, but I should say Lynnbridge was a bad place for her."

"Do you remember her name?" I asked. "It would be pleasant to me to meet with a friend of yours."

"Fleming, I think it was. Angus Fleming. A canny Scot, I believe. Do you know him?"

"Fleming is the name of one of the deacons of our chapel: it may be he."

"Possibly—but it is not a very uncommon name."

At this moment Alison murmured something about her mother, and slipped away into the house. Allan Herrick and I were left alone, and we took the opportunity of surveying each other curiously.

He belonged to the fine type of which his father's house had always contained specimens: tall, rather spare and muscular; with a finely-shaped head, well set on a strong throat and broad shoulders; good features, marked by great acuteness of expression; keen, shrewd, penetrating grey eyes; rather large, but beautifully-made white hands, with sensitive fingers—the typical surgeon's hand. Add

to these traits a look of perfect health, strength, and extreme cleanliness, well-made clothes carefully brushed, and spotless linen—the *tout ensemble* indicative of great respect for appearances and for physical well-being, without the slightest trace of foppery—and you get as clear an idea as I perhaps can give you of the clever, successful young doctor, who at eight-and-twenty was making not only an income, but a name for himself among the scientists of London. I should mention that he wore glasses—a sign of his one departure from the path of perfection marked out for his physical development by his forefathers. He had become slightly short-sighted through his extreme devotion to microscopic work.

“You have altered a great deal,” I said, regarding him.

“And you—less than I expected. So you have kept to the old lines still, Stephen? I hoped you had got off them by this time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, the old Dissenting lines—the lines of Christianity in fact. I thought you would have had enough of the old legends by this time. When I heard that Egerton was dead, I hoped you would shake yourself free and try a literary life or something of that kind in London. I’ve seen one or two

little things of yours in magazines that I liked very much."

"I may come up to London still," I said; "but even if I did, it does not follow that I should throw my faith overboard."

"No, of course not. Still—in London particularly—the less useless ballast you carry the better. And you could have talked matters out with people in London; whereas, at Lynnbridge, you know, you will not dare to open your mouth."

I protested rather hotly. I reminded him that I had left the narrower Methodist creed, and that I was in charge of an intelligent congregation which considered itself in sympathy with some of the most advanced thinkers of the day. Martineau and Dr. Dale, Stanley, Maurice, Arnold, were our gods. We were at one with the Broad Church party, and our motto was "sweetness and light." In fact we had scarcely any doctrines at all. We had morality and emotion—with no dogmatic teaching.

"Then you are in an utterly untenable position," said Allan positively, "and you will either lose your hold on your people and see them make for the nearest meeting-house where something definite is preached, or you will have to hark back to strict Calvinist doctrine by way of giving a fillip to their spiritual

pride and calling yourselves 'the very elect.' You mark my words. Steve, you were made for better things than that. Come out of it. Come to me. I'll see you through."

"It is very kind of you to speak so, very kind indeed, Allan. But I am pledged to the Lynnbridge people; and I see no reason in the world why I should not try at least to do the work that is offered me."

The young doctor looked away from me. "Well, perhaps so," he said. "But I don't think you know what is before you. You'll make very little impression on those Lynnbridge folk with your fine doctrines. And then you'll get disheartened—and Lynnbridge is a beastly hole. I was there once for a week; and I thought to myself that if I stayed six months in that damp air there would be the devil to pay."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that men of highly-strung organisation are unduly depressed by the influences of that marshy land and stagnant civilisation. They are apt to take to drink—and worse. You will find more cases of alienation of mind, opium-drugging, tragedy, vice and crime of the more bizarre and inexplicable kinds, in a small town like Lynnbridge

than in the same area in London or Manchester. Sensitive men break their hearts or go mad—perhaps it's the same thing—over places of that kind. Or else they succumb to the local influences, which is worse.”

“You think I am not strong enough for the post?” I asked.

Allan smiled as he looked at me.

“You were never very strong, old boy, were you? Always a good bit influenced by your surroundings? But of course I don't know you now; you may have changed. And it is not as though you were about to bury yourself for ever. Keep your eyes open, and get to a place where you will have sufficient society to keep yourself from growing morbid.”

He seemed to read me like an open book. I was half piqued by his penetration, yet I liked the masterful, friendly, assertive manner which I remembered so well of old in the days at the grammar-school.

“There is Alison beckoning us in,” he said—we were neither of us sorry that a break had come in the conversation. “I am going home presently; will you come and have a pipe with me? I am in bachelor diggings.”

"Thank you, I shall be glad to come; but I don't smoke."

"Don't you? It would be good for your nerves; I prescribe it to you—in moderation. I allow myself one pipe a day—after supper; it makes me sleep."

We went indoors and talked a little longer with Alison and her mother: then we took our leave. But before we left the house, Mrs. Dart took me by the hand and looked me straight in the face.

"Nobody can say I don't wish you well, Stephen," she said severely. "But it's on my mind to bid you look well to your ways. Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

"Ah, Mrs. Dart," said Allan, with an amused twinkle in his eyes, "how often haven't you made that same remark to me!"

"I make it to all young men," said Aunt Maria, dropping my hand rather abruptly; "but I make it the more emphatically to one whose life shows him to be so infirm of purpose as Stephen here."

"We had better be going, or we shall be in for a lecture," said Allan, half jocosely; and then—in an aside to Alison—"You will be in to-morrow?"

She nodded and blushed. And I suddenly saw what that blush meant.

As we left the room, I put my hand on hers. "Is it Allan Herrick?" I asked.

She looked at me quickly. "As soon as we are able," she answered in a low voice. And we had no time for more.

I went to Allan's lodgings, and we talked far into the night, renewing our old friendship after a fashion; finding, as we used to do, many points of likeness even in our differences. His absence of faith startled and distressed me, but I found a sort of fascination in discussing it. The old disturbing question cropped up again—the amount of man's moral responsibility and the amount of blame that should be attached to sin. Allan held, as I need hardly state, that there was no such thing as sin in its theological sense; that wrong and criminal acts simply indicated disease, or an inherited tendency.

"Of course you see that that cuts both ways," I said. "If sin is disease or inheritance, man is not blameworthy; but also he is not curable."

"Disease is curable. You can't get rid of inheritance," said Allan bluntly. "You might as well try to eradicate the skin-marks on a young tiger, or the bad strain in a mongrel. What has been done remains; nobody can alter the result of natural laws."

Then, perhaps from a look on my face, he rose and abruptly tried to change the subject. "We're getting frightfully prosy. Won't you try even a cigarette? When do you go to Lynnbridge?" he said. And then, when I had replied: "If you want to study that subject, Stephen, you are welcome to any of my books. You don't seem to have read much science or much sociology either. There's Spencer in that bookcase; Darwin, Huxley, Galton, some of these German follows—I forget whether you read German?—take any of them you please."

I thanked him and took an armful back with me to the modest little Bloomsbury inn which I frequented.

I carried a sore heart back with me to Lynnbridge. The revival of old associations had been in many respects painful to me. Alison had refused to be my wife; and although I knew I did not love her, I was disappointed by her refusal. Mrs. Dart's harsh warnings had chafed me; but friendly as we had seemed, some of Allan's words and looks had galled me worse than all. With the views that he held, how was it possible that he should not hold me in secret contempt?

VI.

“And pity of self through all made broken moan.”

VI.

My congregation at Lynnbridge contained an odd mixture of persons. It was one of those rather vaguely constituted assemblages which seem to have come together fortuitously instead of with set design. It belonged to no "Union" or confederacy of churches; it existed, in true democratic fashion, by the will of the people who frequented it, but had passed through more than one phase of existence. At first it had been in the hands of an orthodox Independent body, with Calvinistic leanings; this had given way before an influx of new and strange doctrine, and its members had founded another place of worship for themselves. The newer lights had brought a form of Socinianism into vogue, and although the deacons never would admit that they belonged to a Unitarian body, there was a distinct leavening of that doctrine amongst themselves. One or two only had yearnings for greater orthodoxy: one man, who had lately come to the chapel on ac-

count of a quarrel with the stricter body to which he originally belonged, had sworn to bring the congregation back to the ways of Calvin himself; and the choice of myself as a minister was really a compromise between the straiter sect and the more liberal shades of opinion. I had lived so long with Dr. Egerton that I could not be "narrow"; and yet I was supposed to be untainted with Socinian error. I was said to be "a clever young man"; the deacons declared me "sound," and the congregation liked my sermons. As regarded parentage or connections, few questions were asked; I was known to be a nephew of a very respectable Wesleyan minister (some said a son), and an intimate friend of the well-known Egertons of Anchester: it was reported that I had given up very good prospects in order to gain time for reflection on the Christian church; and this report was very much in my favour. So that I was elected by an overwhelming majority, and expected to combine the orthodoxy of the old with the critical acumen of the new schools of theology.

In such a position one was as likely as not to slip between two stools and satisfy nobody. If I had known the anomalous state of affairs, I think I should have declined the pastorate of Wood Street Chapel. But by the time I had mastered the details

of its constitution, it was too late to draw back. It seemed to me that the best thing I could do was to try, by degrees, to draw it into orthodox relation with other Congregational Churches, and in the meantime to proceed on the broad grounds of love to God and man as the basis of our religion.

This mode of preaching seemed to suit the congregation very well. For a time at least there was only one dissentient; and that was the man of whom I have already spoken, who had seceded, on personal grounds, from a more rigidly orthodox body to ours. He was the man of whom Allan Herrick had spoken, as having married a woman younger than himself. He was a wealthy man in his way, and a man of great influence in the town, both on account of his wealth and also of his unimpeachable honour and integrity. Also, perhaps, for a knack that he had of making himself exceedingly disagreeable on councils and committees when he was opposed. He was a tall, slightly stooping, angular man, with a high narrow forehead, a hooked nose, long upper lip and long chin; his head thinly covered with greyish hair, which had once been sandy, but his face clean-shaven altogether. He was a Scot by birth, but had never seen his native land since he was a boy, and had lost his northern accent to a very great

extent. You could tell that he was a Scotsman by his intonations, and he occasionally used a Scotch word in conversation. In other respects, his English was better than most of his neighbours'; and his accent had a refined—almost a classical—sound when compared with the broad and uncouth North Lincolnshire drawl.

He was a man of considerable information. He had read much, in a sober way; and, like all Scotchmen, he had a metaphysical turn. His proper place was in the Presbyterian Church; but as we had no such thing in Lynnbridge, he had attached himself to the Independents. To any church or chapel that he frequented he brought substantial gain; for he contributed largely to its funds and made himself a conspicuous figure in church meetings. I was early warned by Deacon White, a stationer who prided himself on his powers of diplomacy, that I must be careful not to offend Mr. Fleming.

"We couldn't have offered you the stipend we do, Mr. Dart, you see, if it hadn't ha' been for Mr. Fleming. He pays more'n half of it. He's a liberal man when his corns ain't trodden on; but he'll chuck up the whole concern if he's offended."

"But I cannot be expected to truckle to Mr. Fleming or anybody else!" I said with the heat of

a young man whose independence is attacked. "I shall treat him with courtesy, but——"

"Oh yes, yes, that'll be all right," said Mr. White, with a significant nudge of his elbow. "You've got on his soft side already, that's easy to see. He says to me only yesterday, 'I think we shall make something of that young man, White,' as pleased as Punch. You see, you're a scholar and all that, Mr. Dart, and you know how to answer him. It's all very well to be good-looking and please the ladies, but you've got to keep your eyes open when you deal with Fleming."

As a matter of fact, Mr. Fleming did seem to have taken a liking to me. He invited me to his large, solemn, well-furnished, Philistine house several times, and discussed politics and political economy with me. We were to some extent in harmony on these topics, and we seldom drifted into theological talk. I felt that the old man was "taking my measure," and the result happened to be favourable. Angus Fleming was far superior in intelligence to the Lincolnshire farmers and tradesfolk by whom he was surrounded; and it pleased him to break a lance with me on some minor point in his opinions, and to talk with a man who had heard the names, if he had not read the books, of Reid and Dugald Stewart.

He had a fairly good library of the Scottish metaphysicians and theologians, but he absolutely refused to read any of the modern theorists. Herbert Spencer was an abomination in his eyes; and he admitted the existence of no economist later than Stuart Mill. He was thoroughly old-fashioned and unflinchingly Calvinistic, but intelligent, and, up to a certain point, well read. He was a smoker, and liked his glass of whisky in an evening; but he quite approved of my abstinence from both, and was heard to remark that I was "a young man with a head."

I saw and heard nothing of his wife, and began to wonder whether Herrick had not been mistaken in the story of Miss Forster's marriage. I was introduced to his son, a heavy-looking boy of fifteen, to whom his father spoke with a half-concealed irony which was entirely lost upon the hide-bound lad, of whom he was nevertheless fond in his own dry way.

"Ralph's a bit of a dolt, eh?" he said to me one night when the boy had gone to bed.

I replied, sincerely enough, that I did not see any signs of doltishness about him.

"I shouldn't mind sending him to Oxford or Cambridge if I thought he would do any good there. But I'm not sure. There's Edinbro' now, or St. Andrews—but he's not much for learning."

"He's young yet," I said.

"Would it be asking too much of you to read with him a bit now and then, Mr. Dart? Say an hour three times a week—or an hour a day if you had time for it." There was a touch of something almost pathetic in the hard father's tone. Then, with a touch of self-assertiveness, "Of course, I don't mean for nothing. But likely we might come to terms."

I agreed with pleasure. I had not many "parochial" duties, and the work of sermon-writing was easy to me. My impulse was to coach Mr. Fleming's son for nothing; but I soon saw that the old man would be offended if I insisted on this condition, and so we came, as he said, "to terms." From four to five every afternoon was to be spent in reading with Master Ralph.

"Will you come here, or shall he come to you?" asked old Fleming. "You'd maybe do it alternately, then it would give me and Mrs. Fleming a chance of seeing you. She's coming home to-morrow."

"Mrs. Fleming?"

"My wife—ay, you haven't seen her yet. She's been paying a long visit in the South, nursing an old aunt at Bournemouth. I buried Ralph's mother

twelve years ago. This is my second wife; her name was Forster."

He was unusually communicative. I answered him rather eagerly.

"I think I heard of her. She comes from C——, where her father was organist? Some friends of mine, the Herricks, have spoken of her."

"Ah? She'll be pleased to meet any one who knew her old friends," said Fleming briefly; and then he asked me to come to tea on the following evening, and make her acquaintance.

I was a little excited at the prospect of meeting one of the Herricks' acquaintances. The Herrick family had always stood for a good deal in my life. When I wanted to picture perfect health and happiness, I had always gone for a type to my memories of the Herricks. Dolly Herrick, for instance—bright, winning, curly-haired, vivacious; ready to play cricket with the boys or ride the pony bare-backed round the field; she had always appealed to me as the impersonation of youth and joy; and never, amongst the cultivated young women whom I sometimes encountered at the Egertons, had I ever met a girl who seemed to me half so charming. Would Mrs. Fleming—reputed a friend of Dolly Herrick's—be

at all like her? Then life at Lynnbridge would indeed take on brighter hues. For, in all innocence and sincerity, I thought it would be delightful if Fleming's wife turned out to be the sort of woman of whom I could make a friend.

I arrived at the house earlier than usual; before Mr. Fleming had come in from the mill. He had a "high tea" at six o'clock, and it was to this meal that I was invited. Mrs. Fleming had been away all the summer, and it was September when I saw her first. I was shown into the drawing-room and became conscious of the traces of a woman's presence before I had half crossed the floor. And not a Lynnbridge woman. The Lynnbridge women whom I knew were of one type—self-assertive, rustling, aggressively conventional or the reverse; a little bit inclined to be coarse-fibred. Mrs. Fleming was not like them—I felt sure of that; but neither was she like Dolly Herrick. For one moment I felt disappointed; then I discovered that I was looking at a woman who seemed to me the loveliest woman in the world.

The drawing-room might almost be called in confusion—so subtly different was its aspect from that which it had hitherto worn in my eyes. Here

and there a chair was pulled out of its place; the piano was open, and sheets of music were scattered about it; a work-basket, with trailing coloured silks, stood on the table; and all the vases were filled with flowers. Then the long French window, usually rigorously closed, was wide open; and Mrs. Fleming, in her long white dress, stood half out, half in, gazing away over the garden to the river and the meadows that lay beyond.

Her dress was perfectly simple, but it was not as the dresses of the other Lynnbridge women. It was white and soft—I do not know the name of the stuff,—and it fell about her in long plain folds to which the symmetry of her limbs gave grace. She wore no lace, no ornament of any kind. There was a white ribbon round her slender waist, and on her left hand glittered the golden wedding-ring—still thick and new. I have heard it said that she carried her simplicity of attire to the verge of affectation; and that she loved to render herself peculiar by the absence of ornament. I can only say that the style of her dress suited her to perfection, although its entire plainness was, in the first instance, due to the wishes of her husband, who abhorred what he called “frillery.”

At first sight, as I have hinted, I thought her

commonplace. There was an extreme colourlessness, a great lack of striking points, a delicacy, which is apt to be lost on the cursory observer. She was not usually spoken of as beautiful. There was more elongation of her features than is generally considered admirable; her nose was long, her face a much-pointed oval. I have seen a picture of a Madonna by an early German master that reminded me of Mary Fleming in its mingled passionlessness and sweetness. Her hair was of a soft shining brown, with high lights in its soft waves; her eyes were grey, not remarkable for colour, but for a certain wistfulness of expression, an especial beauty of outline and setting in the still cameo-like face. It was the harmony of her traits and colouring that impressed me and grew upon me; it was a satisfaction to the eye to dwell on something so full of quiet repose and grace. She was full to the fingertips, moreover, of that peculiar quality which, for want of a better name, we term femininity; that occult charm of some women, dependent neither on dress nor on beauty, which attracts as by a perfume, and having attracted, retains men at her side. She was always rather silent in company; but men gravitated towards her in a room as they would probably *not* have done had she been a beauty or a wit.

Why do I catalogue her charms, I wonder, when to dwell on them to-day is agony instead of pleasure? I know every feature of her face by heart; every line, every curve, every fleeting tint and shadow rises before me as I write. Those sweet soft lines and colours are vanished utterly; to the world they are now as if they had never been; and even if in some other country she be clothed upon with a likeness of the fair flesh that I once loved so well, there will yet be always a gulf between us, and a voice to warn me from her, crying out that "in the Resurrection . . . they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven." . . . It is not an angel that I want, but a woman of flesh and blood. She is no man's wife now, verily; and I may think of her as I please. . . .

Mrs. Fleming and I did not enter at all readily into conversation. We talked a little about the Herricks, and about Lynnbridge. She asked me, doubtingly, how I liked the place, and I answered that I liked it very much. "And you?" I asked, with some eagerness for her reply.

She shook her head. Her grey eyes stole with an infinite sadness to the verge of the distant horizon. Her very silence seemed to admit me to

her confidence; it told me more than she had ever dared to say.

I have but a vague recollection of the way in which that evening was passed. Mr. Fleming talked continuously, I know; and for the first time I found his conversation tedious. His wife said little, and his son said nothing at all. I lost the thread of Mr. Fleming's remarks two or three times in wondering whether she was interested, and what she thought of his heavy lucubrations. In the drawing-room, after tea, I had the temerity to propose that she should give us a little music. Mrs. Fleming was, I think, rather pleased by the request. She sang two songs very sweetly, as I thought, with considerable pathos of expression. Her voice was of the kind called a mezzo-soprano, and it had been carefully trained by her father, the organist. Not a powerful organ, it was yet very musical, and appealed in what seemed to me a wonderful manner to the heart. I felt as if I had never before listened to music worth the name. There was a new interest in the evening's visit; a new fascination in the house. I felt as if I had never known before the magical change that a woman's presence can produce. But in my inexperience I put it down to the presence of women in

general, and not to that of any one woman in particular.

I had no idea that I was in danger. I was conscious of pleasure, which at that stage was perfectly innocent, in the beauty and the charm which Mrs. Fleming undoubtedly possessed. So far there was no harm in my admiration. But had I been wise, I should have suspected myself—should have been on my guard against the intrusion of any less lawful feeling. For anything else—apart from its absolute sinfulness in my eyes—was certain to be so disastrous, so fatal to all happiness or hope, that one might have thought only a man predestined to ruin could have allowed himself to be overmastered by the passion that now came upon me like a strong man armed.

I have long meditated on the causes that led up to it. I had been slightly conscious for some time of a relaxation of moral fibre, produced partly by the difference in my position from anything that I had known before. It was my first plunge into independent life. Even at Dr. Egerton's I had been always in subjection. His house, hospitable and homely as it was, was conducted on certain well-marked lines from which it would have been difficult

to deviate. I was now not only alone, but in a place where I was flattered and praised, where I had little work to do, and where, so long as I pleased certain of my patrons, I was sure of an income. It was a perilous position, and my deterioration was swift and certain.

There are few things harder, I think, than to bring oneself really to believe that one has been a villain. It is comparatively easy to acknowledge that one has done villainous things; but then one hopes that they were merely phenomenal, abnormal, not likely to infect the general character. There is always some such good reason why *we* should have told that lie, or played our friends false, or thrown away our honour. "If the world knew all the circumstances," we say; "tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner." I have no doubt but that the vilest criminal in the world has said the same; and yet, I repeat, there is nothing harder to grasp than the fact that if one tells lies one is a liar, that if one takes life one is a murderer, and that if one leads a friend's wife astray, one is a profligate and an adulterer.

And I, guilty of all these sins, and worthy to be called by all these names, was known among men as one of the ministers of God. Time was when I

said that I did not believe in a hell for sinners; it seems to me now sometimes as if no hell could be too black, too awful, for crimes like mine.

There is one ghastly hour, between the midnight and the dawn, an hour through which I have passed again and again, when the veils of seeming and circumstance are stripped away from the soul, and one sees oneself as one is, and not as one appears to the outer world. It is after a first sleep, I think, that these wakeful moments of an over-stimulated consciousness are most overwhelming. On laying our heads upon the pillow at the beginning of night, we are still possessed by images of the cheerful day; soothed by not unflattering intercourse with friends, our souls narcotised, so to speak, by the influences of music, art, and literature—"drawing the curtains of our fancy close between us and the coldness of the world." But that first short sleep puts a blank between us and the day. We start straight out of nothingness, and face—ourselves. And then we see ourselves indeed. We remember the inexpressible meanness of which we have been guilty, the base, ignoble deeds, the failures of our will, the weaknesses of our heart, the cowardice, the bitter ingrained badness of our whole nature; and, bad as we are,

we stand appalled at the revelation. The anger of God and the contempt of man lie upon us with a weight heavier than we can bear. It seems as if our hearts lay open, naked and ashamed, to the eye of the whole human race. At such moments—not unknown, I think, to most of us—we surely suffer something of what is meant by the pains of hell.

I have an awful fear that this blackness of darkness will cover my soul when I come to die. There will be nothing more horrible than to go out into the Unknown, dragging behind one this weight of a guilty past. And what is more possible than that this horror should overtake me, and that I should cry in vain for an Unseen Power to sustain me in the dark valley? For I, who have not kept hold of the Divine Hand during my lifetime, have no right to expect its aid in the hour of my death!

No right—no right!—But there is God's infinite mercy over us, after all.

I went on then, blindly. I read three times a week with Fleming's son; and after the lesson I often stayed half an hour or an hour later. Mrs. Fleming had asked, from the very beginning, whether she might stay with us while we worked. Of course

I could make no objection. Indeed her presence gave an impetus to my interest in young Fleming—an interest which I should not otherwise have felt. I found that every word I uttered, every allusion (in particular) to literature, poetry, or art, was caught up by Mrs. Fleming and treasured as if it were a precious jewel. Her whole soul was athirst for knowledge. I did not find this out all at once; but when I discovered it, I felt a thrill of the most exquisite pleasure. To assist in the development of a soul—to teach a nature like hers to taste, to discriminate, to prefer—what an intense delight would this not be! I brought her books, and she asked me to explain the difficulties that she found in them. Then I took to reading to her when my hour's grind with Ralph was over. I spent half my time in searching for passages, prose and poetry, that she would care for. And as time went on, we read less prose than poetry. Then, little by little, the character of the verses began to alter. We studied Spenser and Wordsworth no longer; Shelley and Swinburne and Rosetti charmed us more. The change was significant—but still I did not understand.

Only—there was a curious reserve growing up between us. We were no longer at ease when Ralph had gone. While he was present, we could

keep up some trifling conversation now and then; when he was absent, neither of us had anything to say. We came at last to be afraid of looking at one another, except by stealth—I speak at least for myself, but I believe the same sensations troubled her. This restraint lasted for some time. Months had gone by before I ventured, one afternoon in early spring—moved by a sudden impulse—to kiss her hand.

She thrust me from her with violence and burst into sudden passionate sobs. I stood miserable beside her, begging her to forgive me; but she only told me to go away. I went home, more wretched than I had ever been in my life before. For now I knew what ailed me—why the world had changed, and why all hope and interest in my work had gone from me. I saw myself on the brink of an awful gulf, and I recoiled. For I loved her—I the preacher, the man who “preached sanctity but was verily no saint”—I was in love with the wife of another man.

VII.

“My soul hath her content so absolute.”

VII.

IT is not my purpose to dwell in detail on the progress of that fatal love of mine. I try honestly to think of it as little as I can. But it is difficult—sometimes I say impossible—to forget. The world is too full of remembrances. The spring, lovely and languorous, can never peep with shy sweetness between the blossoming hedges, and fail to bring a memory of those April days when I walked with Mary in the orchards or broke the hawthorn boughs for her from off the blossoming trees. Never shall I look on the summer sunshine without a quiver of the old rapture—half pleasure and half pain—such as I felt when I stood with her one day beside the molten silver of the sea, in the glare of a July noon. And I am haunted by thoughts of sadder, tenderer hours, when an autumnal wind seemed to have chilled our earliest ardour and darkened our love with the first faint shadow of regret. Winter alone has little power to move me, seeing that it conjures up congenial

gloom and a sense of loss and pain. And to me it is always winter now, and in that winter I shall go down to the grave. . . . But without forgetting the summer that I have known.

For some days after that outbreak of emotion, we did not see each other. I sent word to Fleming's house that I was not well—that I desired the boy to come to me. Mr. Fleming himself sought me out and rallied me good-humouredly on my depression about myself, saying that I did not look as if much were amiss. But he told a different tale in other people's hearing—shaking his head over my pallor and my sunken eyes. "Works too hard, that young fellow," he was heard to say. "Kill himself one of those days—doesn't get enough air and exercise. Looks as though he were going into a waste." And these remarks were laid to heart by one upon whom I am quite sure that he had no intention of making an impression.

I had taken a small red-brick house of six rooms for myself. Lodgings were hard to be found, and my life at Dr. Egerton's had disposed me to like more space than I could have found in furnished rooms. The house was old-fashioned and too near the river to be healthy; for that reason, I suppose, I got it at the rent of twelve pounds a year. There was always a risk of its being flooded by the Lynn

now and then,—a fact which had to be taken into consideration. But I was somewhat heedless of this possibility—not knowing what Lynnbridge was like at flood-time,—and I had taken a fancy to the wild tangled garden which stretched itself behind the house down the river-bank. There was a small green gate at one end of the ground which led by a back lane to the more ordered luxuriance of Mr. Fleming's garden; and it soon became a pleasure to me to walk in my own garden and look at the tall white chimneys, dimly seen between the clustering trees, of the rich miller's new square-built house.

I had furnished my rooms but scantily; and the old woman who worked for me generally went home after getting my tea ready—and sometimes earlier in the day. I was therefore alone in the house one afternoon when I heard a knock at the back door. I strode along the passage rather wonderingly, and not very well pleased, for I objected to having the privacy of my garden interfered with. Tradespeople even were expected to come to my little front door; I had issued an edict against entrances by my garden-gate. The grass-grown walks, shaded by branches of gnarled apple-trees, bordered by rose-bushes running wild and a tangle of wall-flower and lavender, were already becoming dear to me; I paced them

when I wanted material for my sermons, sure to find suggestion somewhere in the neglected garden growths, or the calm reaches of the river, with the single arch of its grey bridge, and the long meadows beyond—stretching away to the level horizon, the line of which was broken only by some whirling windmill or solitary tree. The town lay behind me, and I was too far from the main-road even to hear the passing of the country carts. It was a very sheltered and tranquil spot, and it lay open to no man's observation—save from the river itself, where, at this season of the year, few boats passed up and down. So I resented the intrusion of a caller by way of the garden, and I flung open my back door rather violently. But I had an instant shock, which sobered and silenced me at once; for my visitor was Mrs. Fleming.

She was dressed all in grey, and I noticed that she was looking very white, but she turned rosy-red as soon as she began to speak.

"Oh, Mr. Dart," she said nervously, "Ralph is with me—he brought me this way; I hope you will not think I am intruding."

"How could I?" was all I said. I looked at her entranced, forgetting to shake hands in ordinary fashion. The world had been black to me for the last few days, and I had almost sworn never again

to see this fair woman that I loved; but when I did see her, the world was so suddenly transformed that I forgot my good resolutions. Nothing existed for me just then but the dear delight of seeing her at my door.

"You will come in?" I added at last, after a pause during which she seemed unable to speak a word.

"Oh no," she answered. She went on hurriedly, as if to make up for her silence. "My husband said you were ill—he told me to leave this basket of celery and other garden things and ask how you were; so I meant to see your housekeeper and speak to her, and Ralph undertook to show me the way. He is chasing his dog just now—he has a message for you too."

She turned away from me and looked nervously across the garden, the sunset glow falling on the warm pallor of her delicate cheek as she moved. I heard Ralph's voice calling to his dog in the lane—he would be back directly—I must be quick.

"You have not forgiven me then?" I breathed rather than spoke.

A wave of colour at once broke all over the white face. She shrank away from me.

"I promise you I will never offend again," I said

eagerly. "I will never show by word or look—I will never forget—" I tried in vain to bring these sentences to an end,—“I have kept away from you all this time—if you tell me to leave Lynnbridge I will obey you—I will do everything you wish.”

She bit her lip; the colour fluctuated in her cheek; her eyes sought restlessly for Ralph, and grew dim in seeking.

“For God’s sake don’t tell me to go!” I broke out passionately.

Then she found words.

“Mr. Dart, I do not tell you to go. I only ask you to remember—what you are, what I am. You—you took a liberty which I could not allow—I mean——” She stopped suddenly, and the tears overflowed her eyes. “You insulted me,” she said. “No one ever did that before.”

“If there were any penance that I could do, you would only have to impose it,” I said. “I can but ask your pardon—most humbly and sincerely. Insult you!—I would be glad to kill any man who thought of insulting you——”

“Oh, Mr. Dart, you forget—you don’t know what you are saying!”

“Perhaps I don’t; I have not known what I was doing for several days. Will you not forgive me?—

here is the boy coming—give me my pardon—my peace of mind—before he comes.”

She had only time for a word of assent, given with the loveliest of looks, half pleading, half piteous, when Ralph came up panting with his dog and his message. The glow was fading to a dim yellow in the west, a yellow which passed through tints of green and indefinite opal to a tender blue above our heads.

“I thought you wouldn’t mind our coming this way,” he said. “It’s much shorter than going round by the road. Father wants you to come over to supper, and asks you to excuse me for not having done my lessons this afternoon.”

I consulted Mrs. Fleming with my eyes. She said very shyly, “Will you come?” and all my scruples flying to the winds, I answered, “Yes, I will.”

“Won’t you come in?” I added.

“Yes, come in, mother,” said Ralph—the great boy adored his stepmother, and always gave her the title which belonged of right to the dead woman lying in her grave. “Come and see Mr. Dart’s books, he has such a lot of books in his study.”

But she would not come in. “Another day per-

haps," she said evasively, but not intending—as I could see—that "another day" should ever come.

It came, however, before very long. When I had made my peace with her I was careful not to offend or frighten her again, and gradually she lost her shyness and her fear of me. Indeed, seeing that I suffered and was anxious and miserable when she was cold, she took pains to be kind and gracious, as if to assure me by her manner that she had forgiven my indiscretion. I think she went even farther in this direction than she knew, for she thought it would seem ungenerous to show distrust or unfriendliness for an error that she had said she would pardon. And perhaps I took unfair advantage of that softness of her heart. I do not know.

Ralph enticed her into my garden several times when he came for his lessons, for some of them were still given at my house. He had developed a dog-like affection for me, and could not rest until Mrs. Fleming seemed in some slight way to sympathise with his devotion. She acknowledged to me with a smile that he sang my praises in season and out of season, dilated on my tastes and habits to her, and made her know me twice as well as she would have done under other circumstances. It was easy for us

both to slide into the position of intimate friends, especially as her husband was proud of her developing tastes for literature and theology, and often remarked with a grim twitch of his thin lips (meant for a smile) that it was easy to see he hadn't married a fool. But for some weeks she never set foot within my doors.

One afternoon, however, a sudden storm, with thunder and lightening, swept the heavens. Mrs. Fleming was nervously susceptible to terror in a thunderstorm,—she had never been able to persuade herself that she was not in frightful danger whenever she was out of doors while the lightening played overhead. On this particular occasion we had not watched the sky very closely, and the first flash and peal of thunder took us utterly by surprise. She cried out, and put her hands before her face, while the first great drops of the storm spattered on the ground.

“Let her go into the house—take her in,” cried Ralph eagerly. “She can't bear a thunderstorm. May she go in, Mr. Dart? Take hold of her arm.”

Indeed Mrs. Fleming seemed for the moment paralysed. I took her by one arm and Ralph took her by the other; together we led her up to the

back door and along the flagged passage into my little study, which was, in fact, all the sitting-room that I possessed. My old servant, Mrs. Osgood, was stirring in the kitchen, and her presence seemed to give a certain naturalness to the situation. I called out to her to shut the windows and to get Mrs. Fleming and Mr. Ralph a cup of tea. Then Mrs. Fleming at last withdrew her hands from her face, let them fall to her side, and drew a long breath.

"Oh, I am so horribly frightened of thunder and lightning," she said, looking at me with almost childish terror in her great grey eyes. "I know I am a coward, but I cannot help it, Mr. Dart."

"It will not last long, I think. Sit down; you shall have a cup of tea directly."

"Oh, thank you so much. But I ought to go back. But I simply daren't go out—I really can't, while the lightning lasts. Oh, what shall I do?"

There was such distress in her tone that Ralph looked at her in surprise; and I, cut to the heart by what I considered a slur upon me, turned abruptly away.

"Do!" said Ralph bluntly. "Why, stay till it's over, of course. Mr. Dart won't mind. When the

thunder's over I'll fetch you a waterproof from home."

"But it is getting so late; your father will be in to tea, Ralph, and I——"

"If you will excuse me," I said, suddenly facing her with possibly a touch of anger in my tones, "I myself will go over to Mr. Fleming's house, and inform him that you are here. He can come back with me when the storm abates, and bring an umbrella and waterproof and anything you desire."

It did not need Ralph's reproachful glance and whisper of "Why ain't you civil, mother?" to restore Mrs. Fleming's accustomed placability.

"No, indeed, Mr. Dart—I never meant any such thing. I am often out at tea-time, and my husband does not mind at all. He will be very much obliged to you for giving us shelter. Please do not trouble about him—and I should—yes, I should very much like a cup of tea."

Her woman's tact pointed out this way of smoothing matters. Something in her pleading eyes propitiated me; I felt vaguely pleased, and set to work at once to entertain my guest as best I could.

There was not much to show her in my study. There were the rows of books which had always

impressed Ralph so deeply; an engraved portrait of Dr. Egerton; one or two photographs of Alison and my College friends; a table, littered with books and manuscript; some other articles of furniture. The place was singularly bare—it had never struck me as so bare before. There was not even a flower in the vase upon the small table in the window. “It is easy to see that no woman lives here,” said Mary Fleming, looking round her with a little smile.

The storm still raged outside. The rain was dashing against the window; the rose branches tapped against it mournfully. The sky was dark, and zigzag flashes of light were scrawled across it at irregular intervals, followed by claps of scarcely intermitted thunder. Mrs. Fleming shivered a little and grew pale when these flashes came. To cheer her and divert her thoughts Ralph and I lighted the fire in the little grate; then Mrs. Osgood brought in tea, and I poured it out. Mary sat in the arm-chair near the fire; I pulled a curtain partly over the window so that she should not see the flashes; and what with the reviving influence of tea and fire—a luxury which was considered almost wicked in Lynnbridge after the first of May—we soon waxed cheerful and talkative. I told her about my friends at College, about Allan and Alison and

Dr. Egerton, and she seemed as though she could never tire of listening. Ralph wearied sooner than she did, and roamed into the kitchen in search of fresh diversion. We heard his gruff boyish voice in conversation with the shriller accents of Mrs. Osgood from time to time. The lightning grew less frequent, and the thunder rolled away into the distance; but Mary and I sat on.

In answer to her gentle questioning I told her of my dreamy boyhood, my lonely youth. I told her of my early ambitions, even of my early love; I told her of my mother. I saw her eyes fill with pitying tears as Grace Dart's pitiful story unfolded itself. Was it no warning to us both? At that moment it drew us together, closer than we had ever been before.

"How much you must have suffered!" she sighed out at last; and there was a slight movement of her hand towards mine—afterwards restrained.

There was a minute's pause. Suddenly a door banged, and we heard Ralph's voice calling out to us.

"Mrs. Osgood's gone, and I'm going back for your waterproof, mother. I won't be long."

We were alone.

"I have suffered—more than I can tell," I said. "Will you not help me to bear it? Can you not love me a little?—Mary, Mary,—I would give the world for *you!*"

She made no answer in spoken words, but she burst into sudden tears. Her head fell forward upon my breast as I took her in my arms. The roses tapped against the window, and the thunder rolled its warning voice in vain.

Next morning I had left Lynnbridge. I made no excuses or arrangements; I thought that I could settle such minor matters in London. To the fever fit of passion had succeeded cold reactionary shivers of remorse and affright; I was afraid of what I had become. I could not face my congregation on the following Sunday, and I wrote from London to a friend to provide a substitute. I was in a state of mind bordering on the insane. But a day or two of this intensity of feeling sufficed; my mind began gradually to clear, and to perceive that nothing irreparable had occurred. I could yet make amends, and live within the bonds of virtue evermore. I resolved to resign my charge in Lincolnshire, and to seek a literary life in London. I should have to go

back to Lynnbridge for a day or two, no doubt; but I would not linger there. And my return would be the easier because of an item of news, over which I lingered, in a letter which I received from Ralph Fleming, who believed, like all Lynnbridge, that I had been called away on "urgent family business"—generally understood to mean the death of a rich relative. "Mother is away," Ralph wrote. "She took to having fainting fits, and father said she'd better go to the seaside for a month." This reassured me. I could go back to Lynnbridge without the fear—the hope—of meeting her; I might, by courage and resolution, contrive never to meet her again. Life would be over for me, no doubt; but there was a life of the soul which I yet esteemed—a life which must be killed if I sinned knowingly and led *her* to sin. Was her welfare not dear to me as my own? I asked myself. What hope of good or happiness in this world or the world to come if we forgot our duties, broke our closest ties, dishonoured our bodies and our souls, for the sake of our unholy love? And yet I was conscious of another voice that pleaded with me for the joy of life that I had never known, for the fulness of experience, the height of ecstasy, in which I vaguely believed; and it came to me at moments, with a sharp and sudden thrill, that

perhaps it was worth while even to sin, if by sinning I passed into that higher range of knowledge and enjoyment which had been as yet but as a closed Paradise. "What shall it profit a man," seemed to me a question capable of two answers. Even if a man did lose his own soul it was something to have gained the world. It did not strike me then that one of the most common tricks the devil plays is to persuade you to sell your soul, and then refuse to give the price he named for it.

I stayed for some days at my quiet hotel in Bloomsbury. I wandered about the streets in aimless fashion, not trying to see my friends nor to occupy myself. The long June days seemed to me intolerably garish. It was as though I wore a black crape mask over my face, deadening the colours and the freshness of everything I saw. But while I was still in this hopeless state I one day ran up against Allan Herrick, just as he was coming out of a house in Portman Square.

"Why, good heavens, Stephen! What brings you to London, and what on earth makes you look like that?"

I tried to work my stiff features into the semblance of a smile. Herrick stared at me.

"What an extraordinary thing!" he said. "I say, Stephen—— Oh, well, never mind—have you been ill, man? What's the matter?"

"Nothing at all," I answered. "I am in London for a few days. For rest and change, you know."

"You look as if you needed both," he said, eyeing me keenly. "It's that confounded Lincolnshire marsh, I suppose. You are a wreck of yourself, old boy. Come along with me; I shall have to prescribe for you. At any rate, come and have some lunch."

I yielded, for I had not the resolution to say no. Allan put his arm into mine, and led me to a restaurant, where he ordered one or two dishes. "How about your patients?" I asked him, trying to get up a decent show of interest in his affairs.

"Oh, I've left another man in charge to-day. I was summoned to an old fellow in Portman Square; I came across him in Switzerland a year or two ago, and doctored him through an attack of his particular ailment, and he has been good enough to swear by me ever since. It is all the better for me, of course."

"Of course," I answered a little feebly. Then, half mechanically, "What is his name?"

Herrick stared at me again. "His name," he

said drily, "is Norreys—Stephen Norreys. Know the name?"

"No, I never heard it before."

The waiter brought us our cutlets, and for a minute or two Allan kept silence, with something of a disconcerted air. Then he continued: "The fact is—don't be offended, old man—but there is the most extraordinary likeness between that man and you. I thought possibly you might be connected, in some way or another. I may tell you the likeness is amazing. You are the image of what that man must have been at your age."

I laid down my knife and fork and pushed away my plate. A sudden memory almost overpowered me. Mr. Dart had said that Stephen was my father's name.

"Do you know where he comes from?" I asked.

"Yes, he has succeeded lately to a big property in the North of England—his uncle left it to him. The name of the nearest town is Vauston; the house is Vauston Towers."

"Yes," I said, scarcely knowing the sense of my own words; "that was the name." I remembered that my uncle had spoken of Vauston Towers.

Allan looked round at me hurriedly. "I did not mean to hurt you, Steve. But if you think——"

"It is quite possible," I said, nerving myself to speak, "that the man you speak of is—a relation of mine. But I cannot be sure."

"If you will authorise me, I will see what I can do to find out. The old man trusts me, I believe; and he has no wife or child; he might be glad to find an heir——"

"No," I said decisively, "I would rather not meet him; I do not want to know whether he is related to me or not."

A long silence fell between us after this; Herrick seemed to be debating the question in his own mind, and I had thoughts of my own that kept me still.

"He is rich," Allan said at last, in a meditative tone. "And he has no heir."

I knew what was in his mind.

"Do you think I would take his money?" I said with sudden sharpness.

Herrick shrugged his shoulders. "Most men would."

"But not I."

"You were always Quixotic, Stephen. Not like my patient in that respect, I should say."

"What sort of a man is he?"

Allan hesitated.

"Tell me the truth—I have a reason for wanting to know."

"Well—my dear Stephen, what is the good? The man has been like other men, I suppose."

"You mean that he has led a bad life?"

"There the Methody training crops out. He has been what most people call a man of the world. Well, if you like to hear it, he is an old *roué*," and he is dying of diseases which he has brought upon himself by excess. That is what a doctor would say; but mind I speak to you in confidence."

"A relation to be proud of," I said in a low voice.

"You say you don't know that he is any connection?"

"Well—you say I am like him."

"You are absurdly like him," said Allan shortly. He seemed vexed at the turn the conversation had taken. "Come, Steve, get your lunch. Don't think about this matter. If you will leave it in my hands—if you will confide in me——"

"No," I said firmly. "I must request you to say nothing more about it. It is as well for me not to know. I should not accept money from him—and if he is the man I think, I could never forgive him for the wrong he did. You know enough of

my history to see what I mean. Leave it in doubt, Allan; and let us never speak of it again."

Allan muttered some sort of apology, and we changed the conversation by mutual consent. He began to tell me about his own business; his practice had increased, and he was going to marry Alison in the autumn. He gave me a cordial invitation to his house, lectured me on the necessity of taking care of myself, and we parted the best of friends.

I had new matter for meditation now. I had much less doubt than I had expressed to Allan on the subject of my relationship to Stephen Norreys. In all probability I was his son. I did not want to see him; I did not want him to acknowledge me; but it was a matter of the deepest interest and importance to me to know what manner of man he was. I had an almost superstitious reverence for the utterances of science on the questions of heredity; and it seemed to me that I could understand my own nature the better for knowing the nature of my progenitor.

I managed to learn a little about Mr. Stephen Norreys in London, and all that I heard corroborated what Herrick had told me. Then the fancy took me—as I had a day or two to spare before I went

back to Lynnbridge—to visit Vauston and Vauston Towers. No doubt the people there could tell me a great deal about this man—perhaps even about my mother, who had lived at Vauston Towers thirty years before. It was a visionary notion and it came to nothing in the end. For though I went to Vauston I gained no information. Stephen Norreys had not visited the place for many years; and the nursery-governess at the Towers had long ago been forgotten. I mention the journey only because of its unforeseen termination.

Vauston was not far from the sea. I had to change trains at a junction five miles from Vanborough, the well-known watering-place on the northern coast. On the platform I came face to face with Mrs. Fleming.

It was one of those accidents which make one suspect the hand of fate to be against us. For an instant I had a spasm of positive horror, succeeded by a terrible joy. What was the use of striving? The stars in their courses seemed to fight against me. And—the thought that had been lying at the bottom of my heart suddenly leaped into view: if my father had been such a man as I was led to believe him—unprincipled, selfish, utterly dissolute and corrupt—how could it be expected that I, his

son, should have the strength and courage to resist temptation? Was I not—in the language of a sect which I knew well—“predestinated to eternal damnation, even before I was born?” What hope of victory had I, with such a parentage?—I would cease to struggle with my fate.

She looked at me, pale, terrified, but helpless. There was no struggle in her eyes—only an appeal. I smiled at her, and took her hand in mine. “Where are you going?” I asked.

“To Vanborough.”

“I will go too. Why should we not have one day together? It will do nobody any harm, dear. You are alone? Let us have one day at least of perfect bliss.”

She resigned herself, as I knew that she would do when I saw her eyes. We took an open carriage and drove away from the junction, but we did not go to the big watering-place; we drove to a little place upon the coast, renowned for its fine scenery, but possessing so small an inn that it was little frequented by visitors. And at this seaside place we spent the day.

It would have taken little for me to say to her “Let us never go back,”—but this I did not say. Perhaps those small sordid considerations which

poverty brings into one's life had something to do with it. I had no money beyond what I earned; and I had not the courage to press her to share a life of toil and anxious strife with me. Once when I hinted at it she silenced me with hasty eagerness and horror. And so I spoke of it no more. For that one day, I said to myself, I would cast away scruple, and remember only that I lived, and that I was with the woman I loved, and that the sun shone and all the world was bright. A glorious recklessness came upon me. Truly the devil kept his word well; and it *was* worth while to sell one's soul and gain the world. Such a splendid world, so brilliant, so rich, so full of ecstasy! What needed one with the hope of heaven, when this life was so fair? As we stood on the sea-shore together, bathed in the sunlight, our backs to a grey wall of rock, our faces to the glittering sea; hand in hand, heart seeking heart——God in heaven! there are moments of which even now I cannot repent; and that was one.

For a long time we watched the sea in silence. I drew Mary closer to me with my arm as I spoke at last.

"I wish," I said, "that we were disembodied spirits, and could walk here—two happy ghosts—to all eternity."

She looked up at me with an answering light in her sweet sad eyes. Her lips moved, but she did not speak aloud. We felt ourselves at that moment, I think, so alone in the world, so utterly outside the pale of God's law and man's, that a wild triumph was mingled with the certainty of our infinite loss. "Bad and sad and mad," it might indeed be, as a poet of our time has sung, "but oh, how it was sweet!"

We stood listening to the grinding crash of the water on the pebbles, the long withdrawal of the wave as it rolled back to the sea. It had a curious effect on me; it has lingered in my memory as the sweetest sound I ever heard. I have never forgotten—I never shall forget—the sounds and sights of that most fateful July day; the boom and break of the wave, its gradual retreat over the loose wet pebbles, the momentary pause before a new wave rose and flung itself down upon the beach; the sea and sky, blue without cloud or shadow; the bewildering sunshine on the white cliffs and yellow sand; the swoop of the white sea-gull with the glitter of golden light upon his wings! And withal, the touch of my love's hand in mine, the savour of her kiss upon my lips! Ah, it is good for men and women who can look back upon such moments without

feeling the stain of irreparable, unpardonable sin!
For Paradise itself can know no bliss that was not
mine.

But the glory of this world passes away.

VIII.

“These violent delights have violent ends.”

VIII.

LYNNBRIDGE again. Lynnbridge in winter—dull, damp, cold, and cheerless. Lynnbridge in early spring—half under water, miserable, poverty-stricken, chilled to the bone with east wind, racked with rheumatism and ague, drearily hopeless of improvement in this world or the next. Bright enough under summer sunshine; dreary once more in winter; dreary always in bad weather; intolerable to all save men with robust health and clean consciences—to whom perhaps any conditions under the sun would be endurable. But I was not one of these, and I grew to hate Lynnbridge with a consuming hatred, compounded of anger and disgust.

I had not given up my work; I had not gone away. How could I leave Mary to bear her burden of love and sorrow all alone? Our consciences were drugged for a time by the love-potion that we had swallowed; and, when we awoke, we sought each

other's eyes for courage and solace. I could not go while Mary lived within her husband's home.

For a time indeed I was proud of the boldness with which I deemed that I had bent circumstances to my will. We were the victims of an unhappy fate, but we had wrested something from its hands. We had dared to defy ordinary laws, because, I said, we were not ordinary persons nor bound by convention in the ordinary way. I had called Mary's soul into being; she had refined and purified mine. There was no reason why we should be ashamed. The world of course would not understand how beautiful was the relation of our two souls to one another, nor how, in some cases, the laws of God and man must give way at touch of human need. No law of the Decalogue concerning the conduct of man to man but had its exception, its qualification. I was no vulgar seducer, and Mary was no common fallen woman; we were *âmes d'élite* who had rushed together by a magnetic attraction, irrespective almost of our will. We had not sinned.

And even now, while I acknowledge the wrongdoing, I cannot believe that we were—as many would say—corrupt throughout. The “pitted speck” was there, no doubt, but it had not spread so far but that the fruit might be saved. At any rate, I speak

for her, if not for myself. She had never loved her husband. Her home was uncongenial to her; she had no children, no friends. A great part of her day was spent in loneliness. She was of a very sensitive, loving disposition, and her heart was often sore—let her not be judged harshly that my proffered love came to her like a ray of sunshine which she knew not how to shut out. She was weak, perhaps, but not wicked. There were “depths of purity immovable beneath the troubled surface of her crime.” And of her, as of another woman, it surely shall be said that her sins are forgiven her, because she loved much.

For myself, heap on me what contumely you will; for myself I have not a word to say.

In that first splendid recoil, as it seemed to us, from the laws of God and man, it was not in the least difficult to me to go on with my work. It is not all at once that one becomes degraded, even after plunging into blackest sin. It is the ever-gnawing consciousness of a guilty secret, of a discrepancy between the inward and outward life, that degrades. There is no possibility of nobleness in the hypocrite. *Pecca fortiter*—Yes, and repent and be cleansed; but to sin weakly, deceitfully, remorse-

fully, takes the heart out of a man. It would have been a manlier thing for me to defy the world, bear the shame of its pointing finger, and carry away the woman I loved, even in poverty and disgrace, than to live as I lived at Lynnbridge. But I shrank from this course—not, I trust, for my own sake alone, but for hers. And I had the madness to believe that I could beat myself against the rock of the law and be unharmed, that I could behave as a criminal and not sink to a criminal's level, touch pitch and not be defiled. Surely I must have deceived myself systematically for many years before I reached that depth of self-deception? I should have deemed it an insult indeed to be branded as a criminal, almost an insult to be called by the more ordinary name of sinner. Was I not rather a hero, a martyr—and Mary my patron saint?

[*Written in the margin:—*“So foolish was I and ignorant: even as a beast before Thee.”]

How came that period of delusion to its inevitable end? By slow degrees the change came, and our dream began to fade. Our treachery to Angus Fleming weighed us down in spite of our resistance. He had been a kind friend to me, an in-

dulgent husband to Mary. Daily and hourly we deceived him and the world, and deceit never became to me that second nature which it is to many men. As for Mary, I could see that it was half killing her. When the first ecstasy of our love wore off, love itself became almost a burden. Instead of smiles, we met only with sighs and tears. We had no joy in this love of ours. We almost hated it; we might have lived to hate each other if Mary had not been stronger and braver than I.

I woke at last, fully and entirely, and found that I had given my life to following a dream.

I suppose that love—as a mere passion—always dies in time. Dies hard indeed, but it lies dead in the dust at last; and should, in the order of nature, be succeeded by the tenderness of satisfied affection and the sanctities of home. Now I—what had I done? In my eagerness to clutch that splendid and alluring dream of love, I had thrown away all beside; I had sacrificed everything that would have consoled me when it was dead. “See,” I mourned within myself, “what I have lost.” I had no friends; my secret had divided me from friendship. I had lost interest in almost all questions of the day; the fever and fret of passion had left me no aptitude for affairs; I had lost touch with the times. Art

gave me intolerable pain, for it reflected aims and aspirations which had once been dear to me, but to which I had become a stranger. I had no home, no domestic ties. Passion had laid waste my world, and I had to live on in the desert it had created. Religion was either a name or a scorching reproach to me. Were the old commonplaces true after all? Did death follow sin as naturally as night the day? If so, it is no use saying to oneself, "I will not die." "God help me," I murmured, "I am already dead."

And yet—when I had counted the cost in this way—my love would rise up like an armed man and beat down all resistance, declaring that it was better to have loved as I had done, and to have suffered all loss and all misery, than not to have loved at all.

So two summers and two winters passed over, and the cold wet days of an early and tempestuous autumn came upon us. I sat in my study, hearing the rain and the rose-branches beat against my window; drearily conscious of the repetition of sounds which were for ever associated in my mind with the presence of a half-frightened woman, with the utterance of her first word of love. She had been there many times since, alas!—but whenever the

wind blew and the rain pattered at the panes, I thought not of our later and more passionate embraces, but of that first exchange of kisses, that first whispering confession which changed the face of the world for both of us. What would have happened if either of us had withheld that kiss, that word?

I brooded over the question as I sat at my desk, with my sermon-paper before me, and my text written out smooth and fair. "We all do fade as a leaf"—that was the subject I had chosen for my next discourse. I still prided myself a little on the appropriateness of my sermons to the time of year or local circumstance. I used rather to envy the Church of England for breaking up the year into times and seasons, so that there was, on the whole, so little chance of private judgment in the choice of subjects. Their written prayers too would have been a great relief to me. It was the most painful part of my duty to lift my voice Sunday after Sunday in addresses to the Almighty, of which the world would scarcely have deemed a word sincere. Sometimes I used to congratulate myself on the dexterity with which I skirted round (as I thought) all positive insincerity of diction; I would pray for blessings on the Queen, the country, the army, navy,

and Parliament, the congregation before me, the sick and ailing in their homes, until I had brief time for any more personal or spiritual kind of supplication. My hearers recognised this fact, with a certain condescending approval. "Our minister, great in *intercessory* prayer," they said, with emphasis. I was therefore in especial request at missionary services, or meetings where my fluency and descriptive talent caused me to acquit myself with credit. When I wanted anything of a more fervent nature, I often remoulded to my own use some prayer of Bishop Ken or other old divine; and this, dishonest as it might be, was a better thing to do than callously to make an effort, as of late I had begun to do, to pray aloud in the way that I was expected to pray, but not as I really felt.

The sermons were less difficult. I adopted to some extent the Episcopal Church divisions of time, and preached neat little essays about Easter, Ascension Day, Trinity Sunday, the Conversion of St. Paul, and so on. During the long train of Sundays after Trinity I gave a series of discourses on inspiration, on Biblical criticism, on various virtues and vices. It will easily be seen that out of these I could keep any flavour of "unction" or personal earnestness. The older members of the congregation complained

from time to time that I gave them "no gospel"; but young people liked my brisk, short, rather worldly-sounding moral essays, and came in considerable numbers to the chapel. The roll of church membership did not increase; but the collections were fairly good, and the deacons did not complain, though I think there were those among my hearers who felt that when they asked for bread I gave them but a stone.

So, as the season was autumnal and the trees were turning brown, I chose a strictly appropriate sentence to be commented upon, "We all do fade as a leaf." It was to be a serious, reflective, almost sentimental discourse, upon the approach of age, the mellowness and beauty of the ripening fruit of experience, the kindly wisdom which was to make up for the cruder joys of youth. . . . A sermon moulded closely on the style of one of my favourite essayists, and no more applicable to the case of any sin-sick, starving soul, than a string of pearls to a man dying of thirst and hunger in the desert.

It did not go well, that sermon. I could not get on with it. Something seemed wrong with the words, with the feeling, with the world—and myself. The everlasting tap-tapping of the rose-branches had

much to do with it. I got up hastily once or twice and looked at them through the rain-wet panes, vowing that I would cut them away. I had intended to do this several times, for their tapping irritated me; besides it made me nervous; for more than once Mary had come to that window after dark and summoned me; and I sometimes started at the sound, not knowing whether it was from her light fingers or from the slender young shoots of the wind-swayed rose trees. Even now, in broad daylight, the sound startled me from time to time. Not that it could be Mary who tapped for me. No, Mary lay ill; she could not come. The thought stirred at my heart like a snake that perhaps she might never come again. But—ah yes, she came once more. . . .

No, it was not even the rose trees that tapped this time. It was a knock at the back door—somebody from the Flemings' house surely, for no one else now ever came that way. Old Mrs. Osgood came into the study with a solemn face.

"It's owd Fleming's Eliza," she said unemotionally. "They're wanting t' minister oop at t' 'ouse. I lay it's Mrs. Fleming dying belike, or wanting thee to chrissen t' baby. It's a poor sickly

thing, allays squealin', they say. Eh, measter, y'are n't niver gooin' in that coat?"

I pushed past her; I seized my hat and plunged forth into the rain. The one idea presented to my mind was that Mary was dying and had sent for me. But by the time I reached the Flemings' door I had recovered my calmness a little, and a sudden pang of fear shot through me. What if Angus Fleming had discovered the truth? Ruin and public dishonour would then stare me in the face. But I trusted to Mary's cleverness and discretion; she would never lose me nor herself by a rash or ill-considered act. And if she had been talking in delirium, why, all she said must be denied—that was all. I paused a moment on the doorstep to steady my quivering nerves, and then I rang the bell.

The servant who admitted me had evidently had her instructions. She asked me at once to walk upstairs, and showed me into a room which I had never entered before—an ante-room or dressing-room, with a door slightly ajar into an appartement which seemed to be darkened. Then she retired, closing the outer door behind her, and leaving me, a little confused and astray, in the middle of the dressing-room.

Then the bedroom door was pulled open, and Mr. Fleming appeared. I was startled at the change which had taken place in his face. It was yellow in hue, livid about the eyes, with great wrinkles and an upright line, which I had never noticed before, ploughed in his forehead. His grey hair was dishevelled, his dress disordered. He looked at me for a minute with strange, unseeing eyes before he spoke. I said to myself that either Mary was dying, or—I could not put into words the thing I feared.

“Come in here,” he said to me, in a hoarse, rough voice, which I could scarcely have told for that of Angus Fleming. “You are wanted.”

I moved forward: somehow, I felt certain that the worst had befallen—that he knew all. What next? Men have been killed for less. And with that reflection, a sudden coolness came to me—the desperate courage of a soldier in action. He might kill me if he liked—he had good cause—but, whatever he did, I should not flinch.

The large bedroom into which he led me was so dim that at first I could see nothing. But in a few moments my eyes became accustomed to the light, and I could make out the great four-post bedstead, with its heavy moreen curtains and silken eiderdown quilt, and, with a little more effort, the face that lay

upon the high frilled pillows—a pale, wan face, framed in a wealth of golden hair. Mary lay there, stricken, exhausted, panting; not dead—as I had for a moment almost hoped to see her—but with the look of one to whom death indeed was near. The great grey eyes were wide open; they were unnaturally bright, with a curious glaze upon them; and there was a streak of hot red colour over each cheekbone. Her lips were discoloured—shrivelled and black with fever; there was no beauty now in the soft mouth that I had kissed. And yet she was fairer to me in her weakness than in the heyday of her youth and strength. I looked at her, a great love and pity and shame surging up in my heart as I stood beside her bed; but I could not speak—I was forced to wait upon events. I did not yet know why I had been brought there; but from the agony in her pathetic eyes I feared the worst.

Fleming stood at the end of the bed, and looked over its mahogany boards towards his wife. I began to distinguish a sort of malignancy in his face. He broke into rasping speech at last. I think he was stimulated to it by a sound which stirred the air—a baby's cry, which came from another room.

“Why don't you do your office?” he said savagely to me. “What else have I brought you

here for, you that call yourself a servant of God? Down on your knees, man, and pray for her—she needs prayer surely—and God knows how sore you need it for yourself! Have you nothing to say, Mr. Minister?—you that have done your devilish work so well!”

His word seemed to bring some strength back to the panting woman upon the pillows. She raised her head a little way and looked at him, then let it fall back upon the pillow with a moan.

“Yes, I know what you want to say,” he went on, in his merciless persistent way. “You want to remind me that I made you a promise; oh yes, I have not forgotten it. But I will have my say first—and something else. I will have your acknowledgment, your confession, Stephen Dart, as I have *hers*, that you, a preacher of God’s truth, a minister whom I have heard a hundred times call on God to make His ways clear to the earth, that you were her lover—that you led her into sin—that you—*you*—are the father of her child! She speaks truth, does she not? A woman’s not very likely to swear falsely on such a subject! So you, sir, speak the truth too, and confess yourself a hypocrite and an adulterer, or, by the Lord who made us, I will strangle you with my own hands.”

I made a gesture towards the bed on which his wife lay. "Consider her, not me," I said.

"Speak out, sir; you have been my wife's paramour?"

"I have loved her," I said. "And I love her now—shall love her for ever—in spite of all that you can do or say."

"D—— you!" said the old man deliberately. "D—— you for ever for saying that, Stephen Dart. Now I will let her speak. You have something to say, Mary. Say it quickly and get it over—for you will never again speak to this miserable hypocrite who has been your paramour—never again as long as you both do live. Make the most of your time." He walked away from the foot of the bed, sat down, and rested his face upon his hands. But although he did not look I felt that he was listening—listening hard—to every word we said.

Mary had scarcely taken her eyes off my face since I came in. They pleaded with me, they implored me for pardon of what seemed like treachery to our past love. But when she spoke, she did not use the language of her eyes.

"Stephen!" she said. "Stephen—come here, close; I want to speak to you." Her voice was strange to me, broken, without its old sweetness. She

made long pauses between her sentences, as if it were hard to her to speak at all. But I was as yet unmoved. A great anger was taking possession of my soul. I was shaken by the words that Mr. Fleming had used to me—shaken but not subdued. I was angry to find my hands trembling, and to know that I was sick with shame and fear. Mary had had no right to betray me—to ruin me for life. I was almost minded to tell her so, but I was ashamed. I stood motionless beside her, and listened—upright and defiant at first, then with bowed head and bending knees.

“I thought I was going to die, Stephen,” she whispered; “and I was afraid—afraid. I could not go with a lie upon my lips—even to save you . . . for we were wrong—wrong from beginning to end. . . . You have been weary of the lie, as I have been. . . . It was better to end it all. I have told the truth for your sake as much as for my own. Because now—now you can lead a good life—you can repent . . . as I repent. You could not while I stood in the way. . . . Stephen, pray to God with me that He will forgive us—both.”

I was down on my knees then; I hid my face in the coverlet, but I could not speak. She put her hot frail hand upon my head. “God be merciful

to us sinners," she murmured. But the word choked in my throat when I tried to say "Amen."

"I have done what I could," she went on, less distinctly. "I could have borne to lose my own soul, perhaps—but not yours, not yours. . . . You have a fresh chance now, Stephen. He—my husband, whom we have wronged—he says he forgives me . . . he will not punish—and you—if you promise me to repent—as I repent, to ask God's forgiveness—better than I have asked it—I shall die—almost happy. . . .

Her hand fell from my head; the red spot faded from her cheeks; her eyes closed. Raising my head and starting to my feet, I cried aloud, thinking that she was dead. But I was mistaken. The old man rose from his chair and summoned a nurse from another room: she came and applied medicaments; left us once more alone. Mary was conscious, but she was deathly white, and unable to speak another word. Fleming came to my side and looked at her.

"She has had her chance; I think she has said enough. Bid her good-bye," he said. "It is for the last time."

And then my heart melted. Again I sank down on my knees; I kissed her hand, and at its touch

—it had grown cold now—I burst into tears which I could not suppress. For two or three minutes I knelt there, shaken with violent tearing sobs, such as seem as if they would rend body and soul asunder; but Mary made no sign. She had taken her farewell of me, and she had nothing more to say. It was Fleming who at last dragged me away, giving me a rough sort of assistance into the outer room, for I was dazed and stupefied with grief, and could scarcely stand now that my forced composure had once broken down.

Presently—I cannot remember how—I found myself in Mr. Fleming's private room. I was seated in a chair at the table; my elbows resting on the table, my face buried in my hands. It was long before I dared look up. But at last I moved my fingers, and I found myself being watched steadily and coldly by the old man, who had evidently been waiting until I was composed enough to hear him speak. “You do well to weep,” he said harshly. “You do well to repent. But weep and repent as you will, you can never undo the evil you have done. Not God Himself can undo that now.”

“God knows——” I began; and then I bowed my head upon my hands again. I could not ex-

cuse myself in any way to the man whom I had so greatly wronged.

"Yes, God does know," he took up the word sharply. "And God punishes sin. His judgments never fail. Therefore I leave you in His hands. I commit your punishment to Him. Vengeance is mine, He saith; I will repay. You shall have no punishment from man, Stephen Dart; yet think not that God forgets, and that you will escape."

"I will shrink from nothing that you think right," I said brokenly, not yet fully apprehending the meaning of his words. "I will confess all—I will go away——"

"Nay, that you will not," he again broke forth vehemently. Then adopting his slower, sterner tones: "You will do what I bid you, neither more nor less. Is my wife's good name nothing to me, do you think? or my own repute among my townsmen? You will not shame me and her by any public confession. I will give you no opportunity of making her your mistress, young man. She is my wife, and mine she will remain. We will have no divorce case. I forgive her and take her back; do you understand? And with you I will deal as I think fit."

"She is dying—perhaps dead," I muttered. "As

for me, I am at your mercy. . . . It would be better for me if I were dead with her."

"She is not dead; she will not die," he said solemnly. His eyes glowed beneath his bushy grey eyebrows with a fierce wild light. "The Lord has delivered you both into my hands; she will not die." It struck me vaguely that his manner was that of a madman—it was threatening and sinister and strange. "You shall continue to live where you live now; you shall go on with your preaching and your praying for a season, and we shall see what judgment will come upon you. I have forgiven my wife, and she took an oath of me that I would not lift my hand against you, nor make you a mark for the world's scorn. So you will still be the minister—a pretty minister—of Wood Street Chapel, and I will sit and listen to you on the Sabbath as before—but we shall know what your words amount to—you and I."

I staggered from my seat and faced him. "I will not accept such a state of things," I said. "I will never stand in that pulpit again—I will not stay an hour longer in the place——"

"Ay, but you will," he said, and the expression of his face grew more and more relentless. "For if you refuse—if you leave Lynnbridge without my

consent—do you know what I will do? I will turn my wife and her child out of doors as well. They shall go, if you refuse to do what I bid you.”

“But it is impossible—it is wicked—” I cried, more and more shaken as the aspect of the case became clear to me, “to get up there and preach—in your presence—every Sunday; it is intolerable——”

Then he said a thing that silenced me—silenced me for ever. “Young man, it is what you have been doing in the presence of God for more than two years past. Do you think you can add to your damnation?”

There was a pause. He went on looking at me, coldly, sternly, even vindictively. But he said no more. I stood like a statue, unable to move from under that terrible gaze. Only when he took his eyes away was I able, with a sort of shivering sob, to gasp out my assent.

“I—will do what you say.”

He stood staring thoughtfully at the table, and for some minutes longer he did not speak. At last he delivered himself of his final sentence upon me, in these words.

“You will live as usual—do your work as usual. You will let no one suspect what has happened.

You will even come here at times—when I ask you. And you will preach and pray. . . . If you are wise, you will use the space I give you as a time for repentance, that the day of God's wrath find you not unprepared. . . . Be sure of one thing, that if you break your word, if you give me the slip, I will visit your sin on the woman you have ruined and the bastard you have begotten. As long as you keep faith—if indeed it is possible for you to do any such thing—they shall have mercy. Give me your solemn promise, therefore, that you will stay."

"Until you release me," I faltered, trembling.

"Until I release you—yes," he answered bitterly. There was a look of terrible desolation about the man. "Go; I will not judge you, God may do that," he said, fixing me once more with that stern, vindictive look. "And may He lead you to repent of your vile and abominable sin before you die."

With these words he turned his back upon me; and I, like a beaten hound, crept stealthily from his presence and the house.

IX.

“Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon
these slain.”

IX.

How easy in fiction to conclude my story here. Mary should die, and I should follow her to the grave, or toss for weeks on a bed of sickness in the delirium of brain-fever. But nothing so short and simple came to cut the knot of our misery. From that hour Mary slowly but steadily recovered; and I cowered in my house, unable to eat or sleep or think for the burden of my disgrace, but strong as ever to endure—so well and strong in health that I despised myself for finding that grief and remorse did not affect my bodily frame at all.

To say that I suffered is not saying much. I was not only borne to the earth with self-pity or mortification and sorrow for *her*, but for the first time in my life I was overpowered with a real—I think it was a real—sense of my own sin. There is always a suspicion attaching to repentance that follows on discovery. But I believe that I was sincere—I

cannot tell. At any rate, the days that followed that terrible interview with Mary Fleming's husband were days that I cannot look back to without a shudder. The waters went over my soul. Only the thought of what my broken promise might mean to *her* prevented me from flying from the place, or seeking a bed beneath the calm waters of the river Lynn. But I dared not do it. The figure of that implacable old man stood in my doorway, waving me back when I tried to quit the house. I feared his vengeance on Mary, and on the child—that child to which he undertook to give protection and a name so long as I kept my word. For their sake—and I believe for their sake alone—I refrained then from taking my own life.

Was any man's vengeance more terrible than this that he sought to wreak on me? If I had begun to grow callous before the revelation of my guilt, I was not callous now. The thick rind had been torn off, and left a gaping wound instead of smooth hard skin. I was sore all over—sore, sick, agonised with shame. But, partly because of the conditions made by Angus Fleming, partly because my weakness was underlain by a core of stubborn fibre that would not know itself beaten, partly also because I discovered

in myself a morbid and prurient love of pain and shame for its own sake (I think the phenomenon is not rare in diseased natures), I resolved to bear the penalty that had been laid upon me, not shirking one jot of its humiliation or its pain.

It had perhaps something of a saving nature, that resolve. For, looking back after an interval of many weary years, I see that I stood then at a parting of the ways. There was one desperately tempting mode of ending and perpetuating our crime—instant flight with Mary and her child to some lonely spot where I could have worked for both of them, and where we could have perhaps lived down the memory of a shameful past and risen—my fancy told me—to a dream of higher things. The natural man within me rose up and cried that this was indeed our bravest way. We could not wrong Fleming more than we had done already. The honest thing would be to proclaim our own treachery to the world and make arrangements for marrying each other as soon as possible. If I left the town, Fleming said that he would turn her out of doors. So be it; then she could come to me. *But would she?* And if not, what would she do? And suppose Fleming refused to seek a divorce? I had heard him say that he

would never give a woman who had deceived her husband liberty to marry another man. "Nay," he said with his rugged brows contracting into a frown, "a man marries a woman for better or worse, and he's bound to see that she leads a decent life. The Bible's no for divorce, and neither am I. If the woman sins, let her husband punish her and reform her. She belongs to him. He need not live with her again; but he can restrain her from living with any other man."

These were the sentiments I had heard him utter at a very early stage in our acquaintance; and I remembered that in discussions upon public men's morality, marriage with a deceased wife's sister, and other topics of a similar character, he had preserved the same sort of tone. He was known in the town for it. The "Moral Man" was a term that had been thrown at him more than once by his enemies. I had wounded the man in his most vulnerable part, and it was not likely that he would forswear his principles in order to give me an advantage.

Should I entreat Mary to come away with me from the life of misery that I foresaw for her in her husband's house, and make a home with me—trusting ourselves to some conception of a higher law than that of man, and scornful of the world's rule of

morality? If she had been in her ordinary state of health and strength, I think I should have fallen at her feet and begged her to trust herself at once to me. But she was, as I thought, dying; it was no use to protest my love, or implore her pity. She was dying, and she had told me to repent—as *she* did. What was the use of making plans for the future? It was all over—life, love, hope, joy. What remained but expiation and punishment? By the time that Mary had regained some measure of her accustomed health and strength I had chosen my path; I had then neither hope nor desire for any other.

Two courses still remained open to me; or rather two ways of accepting the course that Mr. Fleming had decreed. I might sink in bottomless despair, and, while not attempting to take away my life, might resign myself to perpetual descent in the hell of sin and misery. I might go on lying to the world and to my own soul. I might still preach to my people of mysteries in which I believed not, of spiritual joys of which I was incapable, of moral heights—those heights of heaven “where I shall never win.” And then—I suddenly saw how it was most likely that I should end. Conscious of my infinite degradation, eager to escape now and then

from the fret of a stinging conscience, I should resort to some drug, some intoxicating draught, to stifle my misery for a little while. With that second-sight of the future, with which a sensitive soul is sometimes endued, I saw myself slinking over to the nearest big town to buy opium, or lurking about the lowest public-houses in Lynnbridge with the price of a bottle of brandy in my pocket—lying about it, perhaps, and saying that I was buying it for the sick, when all that I wanted was to get dead drunk with it . . . there is no depth of evil to which I have not sometimes felt myself capable of sinking . . . ending at last, of course, with disgrace, exposure, poverty, vice, a drunkard's grave!—I looked forward, and saw all these things before me, with no sense of mastery over my fate. Yes, I knew I could sink to that; I *should* sink to it, if I let myself go. At moments I asked why I should not abandon myself to this despair, this added curse, at once. I had hitherto been a strictly temperate man; but they said that brandy brought forgetfulness—drink then, wretch, and forget thy troubles, and let the world become to thee as a hideous vanished dream! For there is no peace for thee but in the waters of Lethe; life being at best a cruel mockery, and thy soul nothing but a bubble and devil's toy.

That was the one course open to me. At the second, in those first dark days, I hardly glanced.

It was the Way of Humiliation, into which it is hard to turn the feet. The way of repentance and resolute amendment. The winning back, step by step, of a moral standard; the "pulling up," so to speak, of myself in every little laxity; the determination to speak only what was true, do only what was pure, think only what was right. And to attempt this required a tremendous effort, a forcing of oneself, to which I felt that I was not equal. Could I try it?—could I try this upward, stony, difficult path? Was it really possible to retrieve oneself, to conquer the devil, to lift one's life out of the mire? My creed said that it was—the creed that I had of late been holding in a vague, uncertain way, the creed of a beautiful humanity, an infinite perfectibility of soul . . . but my heart said "no."

No, I did not believe it. How could I become better, now that I had sunk so low, than I was before? Had I not striven, had I not prayed? Was there indeed a God to hear me, when He had let me fall so low? And if He lived indeed, how dare I call upon Him now?

So my mind worked on, in a whirl of bewilderment and confusion. It was Tuesday when I had

been sent for by Mr. Fleming; by Friday I had reached, I think, the lowest point of darkness. Following the dictate of a supreme effort of my will, I had resolved to set myself to some of my ordinary work. I seated myself at my desk for the first time since Tuesday—for I had touched neither book nor pen for those three days. I looked idly at the paper; it bore the words in fair flowing characters “We all do fade as a leaf.” And, staring at the text, I remembered the kind of sermon I had intended to write—the platitudes about the beauty of age and experience—experience indeed!—the wisdom and serenity that crowned a long life—ay, such a life as mine! . . . I broke into loud discordant laughter, and pushed the paper away. The silence that followed seemed the more ghastly for that unnatural laugh of mine. I could almost have sworn that its echoes were taken up by other voices, and that all through the lonely passages and void spaces of my empty house there rang the answering mirth of the fiends of hell lying in wait for my despairing soul.

I could not write that sermon; I could not write anything. Fragments of songs, scenes of long ago, sentences even from discourses that I had heard in my boyhood, floated in my mind. I asked myself

if I were going mad. I started up from my chair, and fell to pacing the floor wildly, in the hope that by movement I could steady my quivering nerves; and then quite suddenly I became conscious of that tapping of the rose-branches at my window, just as I had heard them on the day when Fleming had sent for me to Mary's dying bed.

I could bear that sound no more. I sought for a knife and went out into the garden. It was raining hard, but I did not mind the rain. I stood bare-headed outside the window, and hacked the long growing shoots away, lopped, pruned,—nay, tore and hewed—until the rose-branches could never touch my windows any more. I killed the poor innocent plants, pulled them up by the roots, dragged them from their supports, trampled upon them like a madman, stamping the broken red branches and quivering brown leaves into the earth as if they had been alive and meant to taunt me. And then, when it was done, I suddenly remembered that Mary used to love the pure white buds that blossomed on that tree, and that they would never bloom again. Will any one who reads these lines understand how it was that I broke into passionate tears at the thought, and went back into the house, sobbing and wringing my foolish hands like one distraught? For it seemed

to me then as if I were the Spoiler Incarnate; I had crushed hearts and lives as easily as the rose tree. And to what end had so much loveliness and innocence been destroyed? To minister to *my* lusts—to my low, animal, brutish instincts, whether of love or rage. And I could restore nothing of what I had destroyed, although it were dearer to me than my very life.

I left the door open, flapping in the wind. It was nought to me though all the world should come in to gaze upon my woe. I had the house to myself; I had sent the woman away, no longer able to bear the restraint she forced me to put upon myself. I wandered into all the rooms, up and down the passages, in and out. . . . I spent myself in movement, even in cries and tears. What were manliness and self-control to me just then? I was delirious with my woe. And so it came to pass that when at the close of day one sought me—a friend, who came indeed like a messenger from God—he found me, poor lost wretch that I was, kneeling in a corner of an upstairs room, gibbering inarticulate words, whether prayers or curses he hardly knew, while all the house was dark and cold, and a wild wet wind went souging through the passages and threatening to break from its hinges the swinging, creaking door.

It was Charles Egerton, my College friend.

He had written to me of his coming, but I had not opened his letter. Taking it for granted that I was expecting him, he had swung roundly away from a neighbouring junction, bag in hand, comforting himself for the long walk in wind and rain by the expectation of a warm welcome, a bright fire, an evening of cheerful talk, at the end of it. It must have been a shock to him to come to that desolate house, finding nothing but chilly darkness and gloom, and for his friend a crying, howling maniac—for I seemed nothing more—in an empty unfurnished room. But after his first bewildered exclamations of pity and horror, his hurried questions to which I did not reply, and his discovery of my state of bodily exhaustion and brain-excitement, he simply took matters into his own hands. He found a light, and forced me—almost against my will—to come downstairs, where I made matters a little easier, perhaps, for him and for myself by fainting away like a woman as soon as I re-entered the study. When I came to myself again I was lying on the sofa, and he was pouring brandy and water down my throat. I pushed his hand away, and turned my face to the wall. I was beaten; I shed tears, and I did not want him to see them.

He had tact enough to pretend that he had not observed them, and set himself to the homely tasks of relighting the fire, setting on water to boil, and investigating the supplies in the larder. In a few minutes, when I discovered what he was doing, I roused myself as if to help, but he, seeing that I staggered with weakness, ordered me to keep still. "Have you had a doctor?" he said, affecting to think that I was suffering merely from some bodily ailment.

"I am not ill," I said.

"When did you eat or drink last?"

"I don't know."

He asked no further questions. I sat on the couch, leaning my head on my hands, and let him do what he chose. Presently he drew a small table to the sofa and planted himself on the other side of it.

"Now," he said, "you're my host, Steve, and I'm very hungry. You are not going to be so inhospitable as to let me eat by myself."

It was a transparent ruse, and one at which I could have laughed if I had been in the mood for laughing; it would not have deceived a child. But of course it had its effect. I lifted my head from my hands and did something in the way of enter-

taining him. I even ate and drank, and felt by a reviving warmth through all my frame that I had wanted food. Meanwhile, Egerton talked—not too much, nor too gravely—but a little from time to time; and when the meal was over, he lifted the table bodily out of the room, and established himself with me beside the fire. This was a moment which I might well have dreaded, for Charles Egerton was too good a friend not to probe my wound before he tried to heal it; nevertheless I did not shrink. The cold fit of despair had succeeded to my mad frenzy; I did not conceive that anything he could do or say would either hurt me or console.

“You are in trouble, Stephen,” he said at last, after a long silence.

“I am in hell,” I said.

He looked at me quickly. “How long has this been going on?”

“How long? I’ve got beyond time. If you had not come when you did, I think I should have been a raving maniac and blown my brains out by this time. Things had gone too far.”

“I thank God that He sent me here to-night,” said Egerton.

I got up and leaned against the mantelpiece,

It struck me as odd that he should thank God for anything.

"You say it as though you meant it," I said bitterly.

He kept his penetrating eyes upon me, with a look like that of his father on the day when I had poured my sorrows into the ear of that fine old man, Dr. Egerton. Charles's face had more power, more energy in it than his father's; a little less intellectual keenness, perhaps, but more fire and enthusiasm. It was a rather rugged face now, as of a man who had known trouble and surmounted it; a dark strong face, with a fine light upon it, and a look of intense human sympathy in the deep-set eyes. I had seen little of him of late years; but I knew by report that he had grown into a fervent evangelistic preacher—not such a one as I had much sympathy with in doctrine or in method, but a man, as I heard, of considerable eloquence and rare persuasiveness. I looked at him and acknowledged the charm of his personality, but I hardened my heart against his eloquence.

"If you cannot thank God for anything, you can at least cry to Him for help against yourself," he said to me.

The words pricked me. Why had he stumbled

on the very point which troubled me. I turned away, bowing my head against the cold stone mantel-piece, so that I should not see his face.

"I am beyond help," I answered. "There is no use in my trying to be strong in your presence. . . . You have seen me at the worst. I have no hope of myself left—or of anything else."

"You had better tell me what is the matter," said Charles. There was a sort of promise of hope and strength in his strong kind voice.

"I can't tell you."

"Tell God—that is better," said he, in the abrupt, incisive way which was characteristic of him when much moved.

"He knows without my telling, if He exists at all," I answered, shuddering.

"This is a case for strong measures and instant ones," said Egerton. "You have not told Him—that's evident, or you would know that He existed. No wonder you are half out of your mind with misery and pain if you can't go to Him. What hinders?"

"It is so absolutely useless," I said, lifting my head with a bitter smile. "There is no remedy for what I suffer—and it is intolerable."

"Sorrow alone is never intolerable," said Egerton,

watching me still more closely. "Nothing is intolerable—really intolerable—but sin."

"Well, be it so. It is sin," I answered recklessly. "Black, burning, unpardonable sin, of the grossest kind. Treachery, hypocrisy, lust—there you have it in a nutshell. And now, misery and disgrace. If I were not a coward I should shoot myself."

I felt his hand shaking as he laid it on my arm. "My poor friend!" he said—and there was not a touch of scorn or indignation in his tone. "There is nothing left for you in the world but God, then! And if you won't pray for yourself, you'll let me pray with you?"

"Do as you please about that," I said coldly. "I have no heart for praying."

He took me at my word, and slipping down on his knees beside me, he began to pray aloud.

I do not know what he said. In two minutes I had lost all remembrance that I had ever heard him called "eloquent." I think it was the strong sympathy of his nature with all that were weak, his deep pity for the sinful, his love for those who had failed and erred and "gone wrong" in the world, that moved me more than the words he said. And then I had never ceased to believe in the religion that he preached, although I had tried to minimise its in-

fluence and to eliminate a good many of its dogmas. But after all, the main points were real to me; the love of God and the exceeding blackness and bitterness of sin. And so, before he had finished, I was on my knees beside him too, and my hardness and coldness were washed away in a flood of tears.

We sat late into the night. I told him the outline of my story. It was his counsel that revived, cheered, and strengthened me. I was surprised to find that he was somewhat in favour of my staying at Lynnbridge, and going on with my work. "In fact, I do not see what else you can do," he said, "unless the man whom you have so greatly wronged releases you. He is, I fear, acting vindictively and in a harsh and unforgiving spirit, but it is your duty to let his harshness prove to you a true Way of the Cross. You have sinned—yes, but your repentance will lead you to the feet of Christ. With Him it is never too late. Think of the dying thief, of the Magdalen, of Peter who denied Him, of Paul who persecuted His saints and blasphemed His name; and dare, if you can, to tell me that it is too late."

"But how can I speak to others—I that am myself so infinitely vile?" I groaned.

He meditated for a moment. "Do you remember

what Böhler said when Wesley asked him what he was to preach? 'Preach faith till you have it and then you will preach faith because you have it.' Preach what you know to be the truth—the sorrow and sin of man, the infinite mercy of God. Perhaps—there is no saying—it may be that your words will bring comfort and light to the heavy heart of her whom you confess to have led into sin. She will hear you sometimes, will she not? Then you are doubly responsible for her soul. God may use you even as a means of saving her."

Egerton stayed with me over the Sunday, and preached in our little chapel. I was too utterly broken in mind and body to do more than listen to him in an out-of-the-way seat behind the pulpit. But those two sermons made a more distinct impression upon my life than any that I had heard before. Hitherto—at least since the cessation of my college-career—I had carefully avoided what I called "the appeal to the emotions." I had a cut-and-dried creed of conventional correctness. But for the first time since my boyhood, I was now swept away by a tide of overwhelming conviction. Egerton spoke of the simplest orthodox truths—of the love of God, the Cross of Christ, the great choice

between evil and good; but I listened as if I had never heard of them before. They were new to me; and the whole world was new. What though hope and love and joy were gone? I had renunciation and self-sacrifice for my portion in this life, and a dim, distant hope of the Face of God in the life to come. My relation to the universe was changed; and I became, in a sense which Egerton would perhaps have doubted, a new man—with a full determination to forget the past which I could not redeem, and to live henceforth for the glory of that God whom I had outraged and betrayed. It seemed to me almost possible that I could, after all, redeem the past.

Well, at any rate, Egerton's visit had saved me from despair. He had shown me a way out of the tangle, and a mode of living which was not utterly unworthy. He spoke many true and noble words to me before he went away. After making inquiries into the history of my life at Lynnbridge, he told me roundly that I had shamefully neglected my plain duty. There was enough sickness, and poverty, and wickedness in that little country town as would serve to fill up the working days of a dozen men who wanted to do it good. He laid it as a charge

upon me to seek out the poorest and the vilest, and to take my message of Christ's mercy to them. "For you *have* a message now," he said, "even if you never had one before. God can turn our very sins to account. See that you be not unfaithful to what He has given you to do for Him."

And then he departed, having himself done as great a work of charity as I think it is given to mortal man to do.

I heard before he left that Mary Fleming was recovering. I saw none of the family, of course, but Mrs. Osgood told me that Ralph had been sent away to a tutor's, that Mr. Fleming looked "awfully bad," and that the baby, though delicate, was "improving." I think that Mrs. Osgood came very near to guessing the truth. But she was a discreet woman, with a liking for me, and she scrupulously respected my evident trouble of mind. I had a great difficulty, however, with other members of my congregation, who persisted in believing—very naturally—that I was an intimate friend of the Flemings, and pestering me for news of them. Then I was questioned on all sides as to why I looked "so ill." I have reason to believe that scandal was more busy with my name than I knew, and that our secret was

less carefully kept than Mr. Fleming and I believed. But no "action" was taken, and the only immediate result of the gossip was to fill the pews of our chapel to overflowing—a discreditable interest attaching to me because of the tales that were current in the town.

It was with a strange emotion that I fulfilled my task of ministering to the souls of these people. Strange to stand up in my secret humiliation and sorrow, and speak to them of *their* sin and of *their* need. Strange to see before me, ensconced in a corner of his pew, the bent figure of the man whom I had wronged, his grey face implacably turned towards me, a grim smile—as it sometimes seemed—curling the corner of his lip when my new-born earnestness broke forth. He shamed me, but he did not silence me. I had a new message. I had changed the manner of my life. Instead of idling in my friends' houses, gossiping with the women and joking with the men, I went into the back streets and sought out the very poor and the most degraded. Here I heard strange tales of misery and vice. There was no difficulty in knowing now what to say when I stood up in the pulpit to preach. I abandoned the theory that I was addressing men and women who were moral and religious; I did not believe they

were, and I told them so. I spoke to them of the insufficiency of their own strength, and their need of a greater Power to help them out of the slough of sin. It was a new kind of preaching for our quiet, slow-going, respectable congregation, and at first I am bound to say nobody seemed to like it. I gave my message blunderingly, no doubt; crudely and with half-meanings and hesitating reserve. It took me a little while to find out what I had to say. But the difference was this—that I believed myself to have a great truth to impart, a message to deliver; and this belief soon revolutionised my sermons and my prayers. I was a changed man, and I had new things to say. Even Angus Fleming would sometimes lift his eyes and look at me with doubt, as if he could not believe his ears—as if he could scarce believe but that I was in deadly earnest, after all. And so I was—I was; but alas for me! because it was *my* sin that darkened the eternal light in that good man's soul!

Little by little I came to feel that I was speaking to the hearts of those who heard me. Now and then I was met by a tale of woe which had been concealed from me for years by one of my congregation, by a confession of wrong-doing, by a new aspiration for good. I stood amazed at the things

which were poured into my ears. What had I been about all these years at Lynnbridge that I had not suspected the wounds and aches of the sin-sick souls around me? I was told strange stories now—"because I seemed to understand," the people said. I suppose it is true that one who has suffered and sinned has a greater comprehension of the sins and sorrows of others than "the just man who knows no repentance." Sometimes it seemed as though I had a sort of *flair* for whatever was hidden and dangerous in the lives of those around me: as if I were gifted with divination—my eyes having been opened to see the evil and the good.

So did it appear as if a work of reparation were going on; as though the unsightly scars in my heart might be glossed over and hidden away. But sin is never finished with. Sorrow may die and be buried; but sin leaves a subtle poison in the blood which makes life painfuller for evermore. It is easy enough to repent of selfishness; but not so easy to get rid of the consequences your selfishness has entailed upon your neighbours. And perhaps the worst pain in the world is to know that a very small portion of the punishment for your wrong-doing will

ever fall upon your own back; that you will have to stand by and see others whom you love—the woman who has lain in your bosom, or the children that you have begotten—baring their quivering shoulders to the lash . . . for you.

X.

“A depth of purity immovable
Beneath the troubled surface of her crime.”

X.

It was Mary who bore the lash.

She was ill for many weeks, and throughout that period I never saw her, except on the one occasion when I thought her dying. But I saw her husband. Sunday after Sunday, with unfailing regularity, he was to be found in his accustomed seat, listening with grave attention to the words uttered from the pulpit by one whom he knew to be—in what character soever he might pose to the world at large—a sinner against the laws of God and man. At first I faltered when I saw him in his place; a sense of the unutterable horror of my position used almost to unnerve me when I opened my lips to speak. At times the incongruity—the tragic absurdity, if I may so call it—of our relations to each other, would rouse in me a sort of mad desire to give way to paroxysms of hysterical laughter. I became possessed by a nervous fear that this impulse would one day become uncontrollable; and I pictured myself being led down the pulpit steps, and forced into the vestry,

in the character of a raving lunatic, while the congregation dispersed in horror and amaze. I scarcely know how it was that this consummation was never reached. What I said in those moments of imperfect self-repression I cannot remember. But I remember well enough the day on which these nervous fears vanished, giving way to an overmastering desire to help another soul, even while I felt that I might lose my own.

Three months after Mary's child was born, I was notified that the infant was to be baptized. This was all in the regular routine; and I wondered only with a dull wonder why some other minister was not chosen to perform the rite. But Angus Fleming meant to use even this ceremony as a weapon with which to stab his wife and me.

I do not want to dwell upon that scene. Let me say what took place as briefly as possible. The child was to be baptized at the close of a Sunday morning service—it was the custom which prevailed in that part of the country. Mrs. Fleming had not appeared in the chapel before; I saw her closely veiled, shrinking, as it seemed to me, in one corner of the pew. I got through the service as speedily as I could, and the little christening party then came forward to the communion rails,

We did not use the Church of England form, of course; but we had a form of our own, and all went well until the moment when I had to take the sleeping babe into my arms and ask its name.

Mr. Fleming answered me, "Stephen Dart," he said.

I paused for a moment; I could not help it. My own name was not what I had expected to hear. After that moment's pause I went on with the service, naming the child as he had desired.. But before the words were well out of my mouth, Mary Fleming fell fainting to the floor. I believe she had known no more than I what name her husband had chosen to bestow upon the child.

It was supposed that the fatigue of the service had been too much for Mrs. Fleming. It was also supposed that the name had been given to the boy out of "compliment" to me—I do not believe that a soul suspected the real meaning, the terrible torture of that little scene at the communion rails.

I spent a day of agony. At night I had to preach again. But what should I say? I took a paper of notes to the chapel, but I did not feel sure that I should use them. I hardly lifted my eyes until the service was well advanced; and then, timidly yet instinctively, I darted a glance towards

Fleming's pew, which directly fronted the pulpit. To my amaze, Mrs. Fleming was there again, with her husband at her side. Her veil was raised, and I could see how white, how frail, how forlorn she looked; whilst he—the man who was her husband—sat rigid, unbending, with folded arms and stern grey face, at her side.

It was then that all fear for myself vanished. Surely I had a message for that poor desolate woman, who owed her desolateness to me! If I had any reality in my beliefs, any genuine trust in the power of a God to save—it came across me suddenly—was it not the time to show it now? Oh, surely I could do my best to show her that I had found some way out of darkness and corruption, that there was indeed—even for us—some glimmer of hope and light? Did ever penitent have such a chance before? Was it not worth while to have stayed and suffered, as I had done, if by so doing I might be the means of leading that errant soul, which I had misled, back to the paths of peace? What did it matter to me now that the old man sat there, grim as an old grey wolf, gloating over our misery, disdainful of the hypocrisy, as he called it, which he had himself prescribed? What did it matter that the world—if it knew the truth—would

brand me with the blackest and vilest kind of falsehood? God and my own heart knew how far I meant what I said when I got up that night in the little, hot, gas-lighted chapel, sending my notes to the wind, that I might preach—to *her*. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.” That was the substance of my sermon. Foul as our hearts might be, scarlet our sin, yet hope and faith and love might yet be ours; and we, the lost, were those whom Christ himself had promised to restore.

She never failed, after that Sunday, to be in her place beside her husband in his pew. She did not often lift her head; but I felt that she listened—listened—as if her whole soul hung upon my words. And I spoke often to her alone—forgetting my own unworthiness and humiliation in the hope of bringing some light into her life; and restraining myself from public confession of my guilt only because of the difficulty of making it without leading suspicion to rest on her. The hypocrisy that a great and secret sin almost necessarily involves ought surely to be reckoned among its punishments. For it is neither easy nor pleasant to be always wearing the Black Veil.

Of course I went no more to Angus Fleming's house as a friend, although on several occasions I crossed his threshold in company with other ministers or the office-bearers of the church. His wife was never visible on these days. It was generally understood that she was in very delicate health. She seldom went out, except on Sundays; and as if by mutual consent we avoided meeting even when we saw each other at a distance in the street. Now and then, indeed, some meetings were inevitable; and my soul was racked anew with anguish when I noted the changes that time and sorrow were making in her sweet wan face. After a time, I dared not even look. And so the months went on and grew into years—into three weary, solitary, but not altogether despairing years; a lull in the storm of passion which was not yet quite at rest.

Ralph never came near me. He had no suspicion of the truth, but his father managed to detach him from me entirely. I have reason to think that Mr. Fleming made some charge against me which, although less damning than the reality, was sufficiently black to destroy the boy's faith in me.

The autumn was drawing in apace. The red-denied leaves were beginning to fall from the trees

about my house. It was in the soft dimness of a warm September dusk that I got up hurriedly—I did not know why—from my study-table, with a sudden impulse to go out into the fresh air. I felt as if I had an appointment which I had hitherto forgotten. I caught up my hat and hurried out into the lane which led past my house and garden to the high-road. And there I found out why I had been drawn, as it were, by that unseen magnetic influence. As soon as I went out and saw the slight figure, wrapped in a shawl, pacing up and down the narrow lane, I knew why I had come. *She* was there. I had said no word to her for three long years, but now I spoke.

“Mary!” And then I stopped short, face to face with her, holding out my hands.

She was changed—strangely changed. The shawl which was wrapped round her head defined the wasted outlines of her face, showing but too plainly the hollows of temple and of cheek. Her eyes were large and strangely bright; the soft hair that blew about her temples was duller in tint than it used to be,—I think it was even touched with grey. A hectic flush burned on her cheeks, above the cheek-bone—this glow of colour on a face usually so pale gave her a fleeting look of brilliancy and ardour, fed, as it were, by some internal fire.

But there was also a frailness of appearance, a feebleness of movement, that startled and inexpressibly distressed me; for it seemed as if the very beauty of her face was but the sign-manual of weakness and disease.

"I came out to look for you," she said, not touching my hands, and keeping herself at about a yard's distance from me. "I was restless; I could not stay in the house, and I knew that you generally came out about this time."

I was stupidly dumb; my eyes searched her face, but I could not speak. I was overcome with the flood of rapture that suddenly poured itself through my whole being. To see her once again—to look into her eyes, and hear her voice! was it nothing to a man who loved her as I had done? as I loved her, and as, to my infinite despair, I love her still! I had fancied that the hunger for her presence, once so strong, had died away, killed by starvation; it leaped up now like a wild beast, active, eager, insistent. I was sorry afterwards that I had found no words to say, for she, naturally enough, misinterpreted my silence.

"I ought not to come; I know I ought not to come," she broke out, almost with a cry. "I see what you think of me in your face; but indeed—

indeed"—with sobbing vehemence—"I meant no harm! I only wanted to speak to you once again—to ask you something—and I had no other way!"—She hid her face in her hands, and stood there sobbing helplessly.

"Mary! Mary—for God's sake don't think I meant to blame you!" I said. "How could I? I who——"

"—Who love you so well," it was on the tip of my tongue to say, but I restrained myself in time. Had those three years taught me no self-control?—I was as one fighting with wild beasts; almost they had the mastery of me; they flew at my throat and held me down. But I was not quite beaten yet.

"I know you would never reproach me," she said, with an effort to regain calmness. She let her hands fall to her side, and turned her face, wet and flushed, upon me. The shawl had fallen back upon her shoulders, and the wind was ruffling that dear fair head—I put out my hand involuntarily to draw the woollen wrap more closely round her; but she shrank back.

"I have not much time," she said hurriedly. "Let me tell you why I wanted to see you, and then perhaps you will see that I am not doing so very wrong. Because I know—I understand now how

changed you are—how differently you feel. You have taught me a great many things. I see everything differently too. But to-night I felt that I must see you—once more—before I—died.”

“Died! Mary?”

“Yes—I think so. I don’t believe that I shall live very long. Lynnbridge doesn’t agree with me, I suppose; it is so cold and damp.”

“You ought not to be out here. Won’t you come to my house—once again? You know you need not be afraid.”

“I should not be afraid,” she said, looking at me with clear eyes so full of love and faith that I drew back abashed, “but I will not come. I am disobeying and deceiving my husband as it is; I will do nothing that might seem worse to him if he knew.”

“But have you been ill? What makes you think——”

“Ah, never mind all that. Let me speak—then I will go! I must not stay too long, you know . . . I might be missed. I want first to thank you——”

“To thank *me*, Mary?”

“Yes, you—you indeed—for all the help and comfort you have been giving me for the last three years. Do you think I have not understood? Oh, often and often I have said to myself ‘he means that

for me'—'he is telling me what to do'—'this is what he has gone through'—and I have been so glad, so thankful! It was hard at first—very hard. But after a time—when I came to see how changed you were—how good——"

"No, no! anything but that!" I interrupted her involuntarily.

"Of course you will say so; I know your humility too well to suppose that you will say anything else. Oh, Stephen, what changed you so? Was it your repentance? Mine—such as it was—would never have led me any higher; but yours seemed to teach you so many things—and then you were able to teach me—to lead me higher too——"

"If you have learnt anything, it has not been my teaching, but God's," I said hoarsely. I could not speak as I felt that it was perhaps my duty to speak; my strength had deserted me. It seemed the bitterest irony that she should think of me as her teacher.

"You have done a great deal for me," she went on quickly. "You showed me the way to God, and then He taught me Himself. I wanted to thank you for what you have done——"

"What I have done," I cried bitterly, "was to lead you into shame and sin."

"But surely," she said, with a strange new earnestness, "if what you say is true, we can be lifted out of the shame and sin to higher things? Oh, don't tell me that you have not really believed what it has comforted me so to hear!"—There was a ring of anguish in her voice.

"No; God forgive me! I do believe it," I said. "What else is there for us to cling to,—we that have not even each other—if we have not God!"

She looked at me in silence for a moment, with alarmed, bewildered eyes. And I, ashamed of that rush of overmastering temptation, of that invincible scepticism which, I have sometimes thought, is apt to lie at the back of all belief, spoke strongly and hastily.

"No, Mary, we have a faith in that which is divine; we believe in God's help, and in final victory. Never doubt it. If I have been of help to you I am but too thankful. And is that all—all that you wished to say?"

"No." She drew nearer, and her face wore an expression of pain. Perhaps she thought that I was cold—I who was steeling myself not to fall down in the dust before her, and tell her how I loved her better than my own soul. "It is about my—my child I want to speak to you, Stephen." She drew

her breath quickly, and seemed almost unable to say more. "You know—you know," she murmured.

"Can I do anything for him, Mary?"

"If only I could leave him to you when I die!" she broke out passionately. "Nobody loves him but me. My husband—he—he hates him. He says he is a child of wrath—a reprobate from his birth; and when I am gone, who will stand between them? Stephen, when I die will you take him? You know why I ask."

"If Angus Fleming will allow it, I will take him and bring him up—as my own son. Is that enough? I will swear it, if you like."

"No! that is enough"—with a great sobbing sigh. "Then I shall die—content."

"But why need you die? Surely you might be saved yet? Surely—if you were happier and better cared for you would be stronger—you would recover——"

"Ah yes," she said simply, but with great mournfulness of tone, "if I were happy, I could not die."

"Then why should you not be happy?—Oh, it is well to sacrifice oneself to law sometimes—the laws of God and man—but not to give one's life, one's all! The law is not a Juggernaut to grind us to pieces!—I cannot bear it, Mary—I cannot bear

to see you pining and wasting when we might be happy—*together*.”

She shrank away from me, her eyes wild, her face white with horror. Did I not see what I was doing? how I was wrecking the support to which her soul had clung—tearing away the tendrils of her faith from what had made life just bearable to her—breaking down with my own hands the fabric that I had laboured for three years to build up? But the flood had burst its banks, and I had gone down with the overflow. My will was scarcely stronger to resist a fierce temptation than it had been when she and I stood together beneath the cliffs near Vanborough. And yet God knows I had never been consciously insincere. . . . But I make no claim to true psychological analysis of so elusive and contradictory a thing as a man's nature; I chronicle merely the facts of my life, and leave others to draw their conclusions.

“Come away with me,” I said, putting my arms round her and holding her closely to me, “and let us see what I can do for you. We have borne our punishment—our martyrdom—long enough. What comfort can you bring to that old man yonder? It was well to tell him the truth; it would have been better if we had told the truth to all the world. Let

us have no more deceit; let us be brave enough to face the world as we really are. My love, my sweet, are you not brave enough?"

I kissed her white lips, although her head was held backward as if to avert them from mine. But when I had kissed them, she looked straight into my eyes, with a sudden dilation of her own, and said—

"The world is nothing to me . . . but—God?"

"Oh, my darling," I said, "God Himself cannot undo the past. Can we be worse than we have been? There is nothing so corrupting as the secrecy of our love. And God does not will that you should die! To save your life, you shall come away with me, and you and I and the child will live in some sunny spot where we shall be happy with one another. It would be the only true union—the marriage of our souls. God would not condemn us for that! Far more must he condemn the life we are leading now—a tissue of lies and mockery! Mary, when shall we go?"

I loosened my hold a little so that I might hear her reply.

"We shall never go," she murmured.

"Never! Are you afraid? Or do you love me no longer?"

"Oh, Stephen," she whispered without replying to my question, "have you not believed all this time what you have been preaching?"

I could not answer; I tried to silence her with kisses. "Love, come with me," I murmured. "Do not think of the past——"

"But I must—I must!" she cried passionately. And then, with a sudden sinking of her voice—"I thought you so good! I thought you would help me, as you have often helped me before!—It will never be any use again. . . . I shall never be able to believe you. . . . I did not think of this when I came out to-night, Stephen; I thought you were strong—stronger than I."

"I am a man that loves you—that is all my strength," I answered. "Is my love nothing to you? is that no strength, no help?"

She gave me the bitterest word in reply that it has ever fallen to my lot to hear. She looked me steadily in the face and shook her head. "Not now," she said. "Not now."

She had not struggled in my clasp, and my arms were round her still; I might have held her longer if I had chosen. But at that word I released her. My arms fell to my sides; I stood before her in silent despair and inward rage. Something in the

look of her wasted white face—grave now and sorrowful, yet sadly sweet—prevented me from uttering the passionate reproaches which trembled on my tongue. She spoke first.

“I trusted you,” she said with a tremulous catch in her breath which was almost like a sob. “You have failed me—who is there for me to trust in now?”

Ah, would that I could have answered, “Child, trust in God!” But the words would not come.

It was the end. She turned from me suddenly, and sped away into the gathering darkness. Standing spell-bound, I watched her, and saw her wring her hands as if in mortal sorrow as she went. The despairing gesture startled me from my sullen stillness. I rushed forward to stop her, but I was too late. The garden door had closed loudly behind her, and I dared not pursue her farther than the gate. I called her—called her by name, scarce knowing what I did; but my cry—“Mary, Mary! love, come back to me!”—rose and fell on the still evening air without response. And when I came to myself a little and realised that she was gone from me and gone in grief and doubt, and without giving me the word of forgiveness for which I craved, I

threw myself on the ground beside the gate through which she had passed, and spent my remaining strength in foolish, futile, unavailing tears.

At night the wind awoke and began to sweep bare the land. The branches of the trees creaked and moaned as it rushed by; I heard it whistling in the chimneys of my empty house, and shaking the woodwork of the windows and the doors; and I thought vaguely to myself that the period of calm and peaceful stillness was gone by and that the tempest was abroad—in the world of nature as in my soul. I took a strange delight in the sound of that tearing roaring wind. There was no rain; but the fierce blast gathered and blew all night, and for another night and day; till the trees were stripped bare of their leaves, and the whole country seemed laid waste, divested of colour, left to the dull uniformity of a greyish-green level marked with black lines of leafless hedges and rows of gaunt, skeleton-like, ghastly-looking trees.

The woman who waited upon me brought me news next day. "Mrs. Fleming's very ill," she said. "They say she's broke a blood-vessel and can't last over the night. She's looked rare bad for a good time now."

I listened and said nothing. Was this the end? Oh God, was this all that remained to me? Was she to go hence, killed by her shame, dragged down by the memory of her sin, hating, and dreading, perhaps, the miserable man who had led her to her ruin, without another word? Should I never see her more—never be able to tell her that I did now repent in very truth, that the last night's madness had shown me myself as indeed I was, that I loathed myself for the weakness that had made me seek to tempt her once again? I could not believe it; I sat in a sort of numb misery in my study, repeating to myself at intervals the same sentence in a cold mechanical way. "She will not go without one word to me. She will not die without a word." It seemed to me incredibly cruel that God should separate us—so.

I sat up all night, as if awaiting a message—a summons which I knew would never come. Fleming was not likely to call me to his wife's bedside again. It was not for me to pour words of consolation into her dying ear. All through the night, while the wild wind raged outside, I seemed to see the dying woman, with her sad eyes looking for me, her heart yearning to send me one word of forgiveness. I was

sure that she forgave. Although I had insulted her by my avowal of love, although I had rudely torn down her faith in me, and possibly her faith in God, I yet was mad enough to believe that she forgave me. *Was* I mad? after all—I think not. For a woman's love is as divine as God's; and she will forgive an injury to herself more readily than one done to another whom she loves.

I waited. In the dim, grey, gusty dawn, when scarcely a ray of light had crept through the half-closed blinds, I heard a tap at the window. It was the tap of a hand. I had cut the rose trees down so closely that their branches could not strike against the window-panes; besides, it was the unmistakable tap of knuckles—a gentle, well-remembered knock that I had often heard before. How many times, Mary, did you summon me in the old days with that half-fearful tap, I wonder?—I started up, and tore aside the curtain. Did something white flash past the window in the darkness?—It was as if I had seen Mary on her way to the door by which she had entered in the days gone by. I rushed to open the door, a stab of guilt, a rush of impassioned joy both striking together at my heart; I forgot the utter impossibility of the thing for which I craved. I flung

open the door, ready to meet her, to press her to my heart, to kiss her soft trembling lips and dry her tears——

I found myself staring blankly into the empty twilight of a cheerless dawn; into a shadowy garden with a ghostly river gliding by, beneath a grey vault of slowly-shifting cloud. No living figure stood outside my door. She had knocked—ah yes, she had knocked, for I knew her knock; and yet she was not there. It was thus she had said good-bye: God had not let her die without a word. He had let her come to my window before she went away. But she was dead; I knew it as well as if I had seen her die.

I closed the door and bolted it. I went up to my room, and lay down on my bed in a state of complete exhaustion. There was nothing to wait and wake for now. Mary was dead, and had bidden me good-bye.

XI.

“Wherefore to whom turn I, but to Thee, the Ineffable
Name?”

XI.

TOWARDS evening, on the following day, I heard a loud imperative knock at the front door of my house. I opened it and was confronted by a tall gaunt figure which I instantly recognised as that of Angus Fleming, although at first I could not see his face. His hat was drawn low over his brows, and the lower part of his face was half concealed by muffler and overcoat. He held something in his arms; but what it was I did not at first distinguish.

He stepped into the hall without a word, and signed to me to shut the door. Then he put down his bundle, and I saw that it was a child.

"I promised to bring him to you," he said hoarsely, "and I keep my word. I will have nothing more to do with him. Take him yourself; is he not yours rather than mine?"

"I will do my best for him," I answered, bowing my head.

"I kept him till she was gone—it was all that could be required of me," he continued. "There is no reason now why I should concern myself about him. The child is reprobate from the birth; con-

ceived and born in sin; foreordained to eternal condemnation. I have no responsibility towards him. Take him and let him break your heart in the way God sees best for you both."

I could not answer; there was no word for me to say. The child—a boy of three—stood before me like one stupefied. I stooped and drew him towards me; at the touch of his little cold hand I was suddenly conscious of a rush of new interest and new affection. Life was not over for me so long as there was this little life to be bound up with mine.

Perhaps the old man divined this feeling; at any rate he stood looking at me with a keener expression of hate and anger than I had ever seen him wear. Finally he said abruptly—

"You know she is dead?"

"She died at a quarter to five this morning," I said, turning my face from him. "I saw her—as she went."

"Curse you!" he broke out savagely. "Could she not—even in death—keep away from you?"

And then he staggered rather than walked to the door, opened it and went out, closing it behind him with a clang which awoke the echoes of the house and made the child start nervously and begin a low piteous cry which sounded like a wail of fright.

I had plenty to do for the next hour or two in comforting and amusing the little boy. He was a beautiful child, extremely like Mary in face, with the wistful, appealing look in his eyes which had always been so characteristic of her own. Could I fail to love him for that likeness, apart from any other tie? But my love was at first singularly ineffective. He was afraid of me; he cried for his nurse and for his mother; and my poor resources of amusement were very soon exhausted. Late at night he fell asleep, tired out with perplexed fretting, but clinging to my hand as if I were his only friend—as perhaps just then I was; his only friend as well as his worst enemy. Is there anything more heart-rending to a man than to know that he has been his own child's greatest foe?

When he slept, I sat for a long time at his bedside, watching the rise and fall of the breath in the little warm body, tracing with eager care the likeness to his mother that I discovered in the baby features and the tangled silky hair. And as I gazed, both then and afterwards, I lost myself in marvel over the future and the past, and in a sort of growing awe of the meshes in which our lives are snared; meshes of heredity and environment wherein we struggle blindly and madly until death brings an end. And I thought of what Angus Fleming had said of this child's fate,

and as I looked at the little innocent sleeping face I wondered, as perhaps my mother wondered when I was a child, as perhaps my own father's mother wondered, what possibilities of good and evil lay behind that fair-seeming outside; and whether we were or were not irrevocably "tied and bound" with the chain, not only of our own, but of our fathers' sins.

"Foreordained," Angus Fleming had said. Can a child be foreordained to what we call "damnation," even before his birth? It seemed to me, as I bent over the sleeping child, that there was no denying that he can. The testimony of the modern scientist was as conclusive as that of Calvin. We are as our ancestors have made us. We act and believe as we do because of our environment—in which such insignificant factors as the kind of food we eat, the configuration of the country we live in, the amount of moisture in the atmosphere, all bear a part. What amount of individuality has any one of us? Our environment is our Fate; heredity the Fury which drives us forth to meet it. Of what avail are our sighs, our aspirations after goodness, our passionate prayers for purity and faith?

God, why hast Thou made us thus? Evil we know ourselves to be; but how can we will to be otherwise? How about the weakness that our parents

bequeathed to us as a legacy, the vice that ran in our ancestors' veins, the evil taint that showed itself again and again in the history of our fathers' house? How are we to be held responsible for these things? Resist the devil?—But the devil is our inner self. Resist oneself?—If a house be divided against itself it cannot stand. We have no secret force with which to fight what we ourselves desire.

One child born to eternal regeneration—born, that is, of a healthy stock, of God-fearing parents and grandparents: a child sound in body and mind, trained to good from infancy, impelled to good by unconscious impulses put in motion perhaps five hundred years ago—ah, what would I not give to have been born to such a goodly heritage!

And another child—my own, perhaps—foredoomed to eternal damnation; by which I mean no actual hell of fire and brimstone, but that far more awful hell of inexpiable evil in which some creatures are allowed to live out their three score years and ten. A future determined for him almost unalterably by the actions and characters of men and women long since dead. For there is only an infinitesimal chance in each man's nature for new growths and new developments. We cannot get away from the temperaments that have been bequeathed to us by

those who have gone before. It is the most fatal kind of predestination, which dooms us to be bad, corrupt, evil, when we would fain be good. And where is the way of escape?

Oh, my God, my God, thou hast indeed forsaken me! This foregone conclusion of all our lives maddens me when I think of it. Would I had been ignorant all my days of what the physiologist has to tell us, of what the psychologist has to say! So might I still have found some comfort in a prayer to heaven for help, some balm in the fancy that my strength was upheld by an unseen Friend. But the materialist of my day leaves no room for prayer and faith and hope. The cry of the women at the sepulchre is mine: "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him." There is nothing (for many of us) but darkness, death, corruption. . . . Nothing more.

"It makes a goblin of the sun."

Thus I thought, till thinking became a whirl of agony in which logic and sequence of ideas were lost. Then I slept, but was conscious even in sleeping of that new strange presence beside me, of the short childish breaths and the pressure of the baby fingers on my hand. Gradually that peaceful presence worked within me also a sense of rest; and I awoke after a short period of complete oblivion to

a new strength of purpose—a resolve to make for this child, thus thrown upon my hands, an environment of love and care as perfect as I could make it; thus hoping, as we all hope—how vainly—to mend the irretrievable past by plans for an uncontrollable future.

The next few days were filled so completely with my new cares that I had comparatively little time for reflection. Possibly this was as well. I was so broken down with grief that but for Mary's child I think I might have drifted away from sanity, if not from life itself. Yet curiously enough, I have reason to look back upon those days, full as they were with the unceasing ache of a great sorrow, as a respite, a period of repose in which I gathered a little strength to bear a still greater sorrow and a more intense remorse. The days when Mary was lying dead in her husband's house were not the most painful that I have known.

I was spared the task of reading a funeral service, or uttering a prayer, over her grave. I have borne so much that it is difficult for me to say, as one is apt to do, that I "could not" have done even that; but it does seem to me, not having tried, that I should have failed in that endeavour. Charles Egerton, always my most helpful friend, took this office upon himself, and warded off indiscreet questions and impertinent remarks from the ears of the

mourners. I stood at the grave as others did; and Angus Fleming, with his haggard face and wild fierce eyes, stood beside me. He turned and looked at me as the sods fell upon Mary's coffin; and it seemed to me as though he accused me of being her murderer. But my undisciplined heart cried out that he himself had killed her, and not I.

Egerton stayed the night with me. We did not sleep much; we sat up almost till morning, discussing the points that troubled me, and the more personal matter of my future plans. He was strongly of opinion that it would be wiser for me to leave Lynnbridge and seek some other sphere of duty. I had glimmering notions of abandoning ministerial work and finding something else to do, but my plans were not yet formed. And I felt that I could not act without Mr. Fleming's consent—my hands were tied by my promises to him. Egerton undertook to see him on my behalf; he said that he did not think that there would now be any objection to my departure. The old man had exacted his pound of flesh, and he had had it; his wife was in her grave, and I—had I not suffered sufficient punishment?—There was surely no reason to put me to the torture by retaining me at Lynnbridge.

In the morning Egerton went to Mr. Fleming's house. I waited in some agitation for the result of the interview. My friend was longer than I had expected him to be; and when he returned I was startled by the white shocked look upon his kindly face. He took me by the arm as I met him in the hall, and drew me with him into the study.

"You have bad news for me," I said.

"My poor friend—bad news indeed," he answered.

"He refuses?—he wishes to punish further——"

"Not in the way you mean. He has left you a bitter memory—a last remorse."

"You mean," I said slowly, "that he is dead?"

"Dead, yes; but not by natural causes. Stephen, be strong—don't give way to morbid fancies. The poor man's brain was overwrought by grief—he died by his own hand this morning."

I heard no more. The shock was as great to me as if he had been a beloved and trusted friend whom I myself had slain. It was only by degrees that Egerton was able to tell me the details of this tragic ending to our sad story.

He had been much depressed ever since his wife's death. His friends and the members of his household supposed that it was on account of this depression that he had been unable to bear the

sight of his wife's child and had himself taken the boy to the house of "his old friend" the minister. Ralph had been startled and frightened by his varying moods. When the funeral was over he had shut himself up in his own room, without touching food,—indeed it was said that scarcely a morsel had passed his lips since the day of Mary's death. His mind must have become unhinged through the influences of grief and physical depression; and early on the morning after the funeral—probably about the same hour as the hour at which Mary died—he had cut his throat in his dressing-room. I have no words in which to tell how this—his last action—affected me. Its immediate effect was to hasten my departure from Lynnbridge. I resigned all thought of accepting any "call" from a church; never again would I uplift my voice in any public place as a teacher of my fellow-men. For although no guilt attached to me in the eyes of the world—for my sin and its consequences never became publicly known—I was too sorely borne down by the consciousness of it to be anything but a heart-broken and sorely-smitten penitent for the rest of my life. Truly my sin had found me out; and I comforted myself no longer with the vain hope of repairing the ill that I had done.

XII.

“Thou sparest all: for they are Thine, O Lord, Thou lover
of souls.”

XII.

So London—that meeting-place of souls—became my home at last.

I have never loved the city. I come to it always as to a prison. A palace-prison, if you like; full of colour, life, music, but at the same time barren and oppressive. Work there is to do therein, and I try to do it cheerfully; but I go back to its streets each time after an absence as one might return to a prison for the good of some great cause.

I found Allan and Alison married and living in a cheerful suburban villa, in a wholesome, happy, common-place way, which seemed to me the most attractive spectacle in the world. They had two babies already; Allan was doing remarkably well in his profession, and Alison was the picture of health and bliss. Allan confided to me with some embarrassment that old Mr. Norreys was dead, and had, to his surprise, left him a large sum of money; the bulk of his fortune had gone to various

charities. Allan wanted to hand over the legacy to me; but I refused to touch it, although I did not refuse the help that he offered me in other respects. By his recommendation I got work in a newspaper office, and I accepted a small loan from him for my immediate necessities. I had been somewhat reckless with my money while I lived at Lynn-bridge. I had given it away right and left, and made few savings; but now it behoved me to live carefully, and to work hard for the sake of the child whom I was supposed to have adopted. Some of my friends blamed me for rashness in taking the care of it upon me; others supposed that I was paid to do it; and I let them think what they would, for I could not sully Mary's name by telling them the truth. Only Allan looked at me hard between the eyes sometimes as if he knew; and I think he was shrewd enough to guess the truth, although it was never mentioned between us. I took cheap lodgings not far from their home—it was an advantage for the child that Alison should be so near—and tried to adapt myself to a new life, and to the new claim upon me; a harder thing than it may appear to those who take a superficial view of the situation.

I had lived alone for many years, and had not known what it was to be subject to any ties of household routine. I was absolutely ignorant of the ways of childhood. Anxiety as to the means of a livelihood had never entered into my comprehension. Therefore, my new life gave me reason for considerable care and pain. But, after all, the care and the pain came, after a time, to have an element of sweetness;—it was only at first that un-mixed anguish fell to my lot. One cannot bear continual pain; one naturally seeks—and finds—alleviation; I found it, to some extent, in spite of an undying sorrow, in my work and in my child.

At first there was nothing but grief for me even in the boy's presence, even in his laughter and his love. I saw in him the embodiment of a sin. His antics, his innocent gambols, his childish mirth, used to jar upon me. If he had been a whining miserable child, it would have seemed to me more in keeping with his history. But he was of a sunny nature;—merry, active, and frolicsome, no shadow from his parents' sin seemed to have fallen over that young life. Need I say that I came in time to delight in his mirth and his caresses? He upset all my theories, he was by no means what I should have expected him to be with such an origin. He

was healthy, bright-eyed, serene, extremely sweet-tempered, truthful, frank, and brave; as unlike myself in my morbid childhood as I could well imagine a child to be. I came almost to reverence that sweet bold nature—its innocence, its sincerity, taught me many a lesson, and his dependence upon me gave me curiously vivid ideas of man's dependence upon God. And his transient fits of obstinacy or wilfulness taught me perhaps even more than his gentleness and goodness—for he presented in his puny rebellion so apt a picture of my own long struggle against a Father who, as I firmly believed, still loved me in spite of myself.

Yet, in spite of his eminently sweet and docile disposition, and all the good qualities that seemed to be blossoming within him as he grew, I had strange and agonising moments of perplexity as to his future. Angus Fleming's words still rang in my ear. And how was I to train the child when my own belief in the influence of inherited temperament was so strong? For according to my theories—scientific as I believed—there was little chance for him to develop a worthy or noble character without a very hard struggle for what was best in himself. The traits which had been his parents' ruin were certain to show themselves in him. How

should I protect him from the temptations which had proved too strong for me and mine? He had a bad record to look back on. Should I boldly face the truth, point out to him his forefathers' errors, and let him fight out for himself the battle with that terrible nightmare of heredity? Or leave him ignorant, as, after all, most people are, of his own predispositions, and allow him to blunder wildly in and out of the temptations to which he is most disposed,—as though one presented the son of a dipsomaniac with a brandy-bottle, and thought that no harm would come of it! Needs must be, I thought to myself, that this child suffers for my sin; but am I to withhold the means of cure, painful though it may be?

There can be no warning like my own history. Therefore, I resolved to write the confession which this book contains; so that when he came to years of discretion, he and no other should look upon its pages, and forgive me, perhaps, my sin, because of the suffering that it brought, and be warned against following in my steps. And so, with pain and grief, I wrote my story up to the date of my coming to London; and there for a time I paused. The manuscript was locked away in my desk, and the task once accomplished was half for-

gotten. Now, ten years later, I take it out to add the few pages that shall bring the story of my life up to the present time, when, I believe, it is very near its end.

For there is a natural way out of all difficulties and perplexities; and mine have come, therefore, to their appointed end. We came of a bad stock—my child and I; it was only natural that we should die out early. Witness my own frame, grown lately so strangely feeble; witness my failing sight and trembling hand; witness the frailty of the child I have begotten—a child more frail than I. We die; we shall not propagate our race. In this way nature revenges herself; vice is followed by extinction, and the wages of sin is death.

Always at this point the personal question appeals strongly to me. I suffer and die, and I believe that it is for the good of the race that I die; but does this conviction of mine make me happier? I want to enjoy. I see men around me—brutes they seem to me truly for the most part—who laugh and talk loudly, eat and drink, marry and have children, all with an air of jollity and dense 'good-humour, an air of enjoyment of life which I have never known. Why should I be unlike my kind?

Why should the joy of living be a thing almost unknown to me? . . . It is thus that one's exhausted vitality pays for the insatiate demands made by one's forefathers upon the bank of life.

It seems almost curious to me now that I continue to live among my fellow-men, to come and go, to eat and drink and do my daily work, as though I were unstricken, as though I were not set apart from others by the isolation of a sorrow which no man can understand. I have no apparent reason for living; to no one is my existence a necessity, or even a comfort. I have renounced all claim to be a teacher of men; I earn my bread by the humblest journalistic work, and I do a little—a very little and very unimportant—work amongst the poor. I have neither time nor money enough to do as much as I should like to do in the London slums; and I have not sufficient confidence in my own faiths to be able to teach others. Now and then a sufferer or a criminal finds a friend in me, and I do my best to help such folk out of their difficulties; but I have few counsels to give them and scarcely a word of hope to say. All the training of my previous years seems to have been wasted. Once I threw my whole life away—I bartered my soul for an

hour or two of love; and what is lost or sold cannot easily be recovered. I am a maimed man, with no work in a world where only workers have any right to be.

It sometimes seems to me that I so lost my powers in those terrible days of unbridled passion and impotent remorse, that I need more than anything else to put myself under some spiritual direction, even under some spiritual tyranny, if such there be. My own efforts have been crowned with so little success that I am doubtful of my judgment and my will. There is no use in denying that I am a failure and that my whole life has failed; that I have wrecked the lives of others as well as my own; and that my repentance has been utterly unavailing, so far as their happiness was concerned. As for myself . . . I am worth so little that I sometimes scarce dare pray God that I may save my soul alive. I am a contradiction to myself. For in spite of all these failings and sins of mine, I have never entirely lost the love at least of that vision of the Eternal which only pure souls can see; the vision itself may have left me, but the memory of it has never gone. To be in harmony with the Divine Life is still the dearest wish of my soul; but I cannot make one effort towards it now.

I am a broken man. I have lost my own soul, I fear, and gained no world beside.

Something of this I tried one night to express to Alison and her husband when I was sitting at their fireside, where they are still good enough to make me welcome. But even Alison does not understand. And Allan always smiles and shakes his head when I speak, and says that I am talking in an unknown tongue.

"The supreme fact for many men and women in the world is their profound sense of sin," I was saying to him.

"Possibly. But not to every one. I, for instance," said Allan, "never had a sense of sin."

"I may be wrong," I answered, "but it seems to me that a human being is incompletely developed if he never experiences what I mean by a sense of sin. And for many people it is impossible to avoid it."

"I am not sure that I know what sin is," said Allan. "I acknowledge imperfection, but how are we responsible for it? We might as well feel a sense of sin because we cannot fly like a bird or swim like a fish. We cannot help ourselves. We are not born free to do what we please; we do

what we must. We are a product and not a new creation."

"But if there is Something outside ourselves to supplement the weakness for which we are not responsible—what then?"

Allan shrugged his shoulders. "I know nothing but what I see," he said.

"If there is nothing beyond that, we may as well die," said Alison, a little wistfully. For her early training haunted her still, although her husband was an agnostic and was putting her through a course of Huxley and Spencer, in order to correct, he said, the unscientific tendency of her mind.

For me, I kept silence, for I had nothing definite to say. How dare I speak—I who have so grossly sinned against the light within me? But what I believe is this. If there is no supplementary force—no God, if we choose to name it so—in all this universe to help us, then we are lost indeed. We are mere captives, tied and bound with the chain of our fathers' sins. Either we are the wretched toiling creatures of a day, striving and struggling for no attainable end, and fated to ultimate misery—which is quite possible, after all; or there is a "something beyond ourselves," a Father, a Friend, a Helper, who stands ready to free us from our fatal bondage,

to help us out of the pit and to pour oil and wine into our wounds. If there is no purely spiritual aid to be got or given, then most of us may as well give up trying after goodness. Very few men, if any, can rise above themselves. Nearly every one has a legacy of evil tendency left him by his progenitors; to many an almost intolerable burden. The doctrine of heredity, as laid down by some writers of our time, and assimilated vaguely by innumerable readers, is a stumbling-block to many; and I believe that there is no way of surmounting it but by a firm grasp on the supernatural. That is the last word I have to say, and if I were a preacher still this would be the teaching I would try to impress upon my hearers; that strong as temperament, hereditary tendency, and environment may be, there is something outside us that may be stronger still—the grace of God.

“Therefore to whom turn I, but to Thee, the Ineffable Name?”—To whom should I go in my deep disgrace, with my baffled hopes, my thwarted expiation, my wasted life, but to the great Father who has yearned over me for so many years, as I have yearned over my little child? “As a father pitieth his children.” . . . I who never knew an earthly father’s care, and had no right to bear a

father's name—I, nevertheless, have been taught the meaning of that untiring pity, that eternal love. For even I, with all my imperfections, cannot conceive it possible that any sin, any wrong-doing, any desperation of rebellion, could alienate my heart from the child I loved. My love could but make me suffer; it would not die. And shall the God of all the earth do less? He who begat us, can He cease to love? The last refuge of poor suffering humanity is in Him. There may be hope for others, for great and noble souls with an inheritance of virtue—they may be able to dispense with conscious appeal to the God who leads them though they know it not; but for the masses of men, for the weak and the sinful, the foolish and mean and base—for men, my brothers, like you and me, with iron weights at our feet and shackles on our limbs—what hope for us but in the great divine Ideal of the God-Man, who walked the earth some nineteen centuries ago; whose hands, with the marks of the nails in them, still draw us to Himself, whose brow is still surmounted with its crown of thorns?

It was thus that I spoke to Mary's child, and it was thus that he learned to think of that divine love in which I trusted.

Stevie, as we called him, grew to be ten years old; and during those years of his life I saw in him no evidence of anything but a pure and beautiful spirit, singularly unmarred by the usual selfishness and waywardness of childhood. I found in him no trace of my own boyish secretiveness or morbid love of brooding. All that was loveliest in the characters of the women I had loved best seemed to have concentrated itself in him. There are surely two sides to the dark problem which had exercised so baneful an influence on my own mind throughout life; for inherited characteristics change by new combinations and proportions; and the quality that was a vice in the father may tend, under favourable conditions, to be a virtue in the son.

He was never strong. I did my best for his health and general welfare, but a man is clumsy where children are concerned. It was perhaps from some unintentional neglect or mistake of mine that his strength declined; I cannot tell. Alison gives me this comfort—few women, she says, could have tended him more lovingly than I did, and love sometimes makes up for lack of experience. From the first few days of his life with me, my whole existence

was bound up with his. He gave me a motive for living. But for him, I think that in the black hours which followed Angus Fleming's death I should have taken my own life . . . a thing which I could not do when I looked at that innocent face and considered that I was responsible for the happiness of Mary's child. Children are the unconscious saviours of the race. There must be many a man and woman who would never be brave enough to fight the battle out, strong enough to bear the burden to the end, patient enough to support years of sorrow and suffering and defeat, if it were not that they had still to stand between their children and the bitter outside world.

I taught him all he knew. He was too delicate to be sent to school, and my work generally kept me at home until the evening; it was easy, therefore, for me to superintend his lessons in the intervals of my writing. We were never separated for a night or a day. His mind took the impress of mine; and for his sake I changed my habits, my tastes, even my manner of thought. I feared so much to sully his mind or lower his conception of life and duty that I learned to control my very thoughts in his presence lest some subtle influence from their lower forms should harm his soul. It was to me as if I had had an angel in the house—so much is it

possible for a child to figure forth to men the kingdom of God to which it belongs.

He had been ailing for some time. The doctor called it decline; there seemed no organic disease, but there was gradual wasting of strength, until the end. I have not much to say about these later days. He was very bright, even childishly merry, up to a short time before his death. We did not talk much on religious subjects: during the years that he had been with me the desire to speak—even to him—on such matters had dwindled away. But a little was said, now and then; and they were not words that I shall ever forget.

"You are coming too—pretty soon, aren't you, daddy?" he said one day, when the end had nearly come.

"I hope so, my dear." It was not to him that I could breathe a word of doubt.

"Have you any message for mother?" he asked, in the matter-of-fact tone in which children often treat the prospect of a future life.

"Only—my love."

"I hope I shall remember. I'm very bad at remembering messages, you know; but I don't think I shall forget that. Your love . . . and you are com-

ing soon. . . . You mustn't cry about it, daddy. It won't be for long."

"No, God grant that it may not be for long."

"I shall look out for you at the gate," said Stevie, with that practical appreciation of details which—to us who cannot trust as children do—has its pathetic side. "And I should think my mother would watch with me too."

Oh, my boy, my boy! If I could but think that you and your mother would not watch in vain! If I could but think that in some distant world you could both be mine as you have never been in this! Shall I not love you then as I love you now, or shall I yet long and pine for the forbidden thing? Will my heart never be still?

—O Lord, forgive the words! Forgive these passionate sighs and tears for all that I have lost. Thou hast taken my dear ones to Thyself; keep them safe, Lord—safe even from me.

Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest——

[Stephen Dart died on the day of his last entry in this book.]

THE END.

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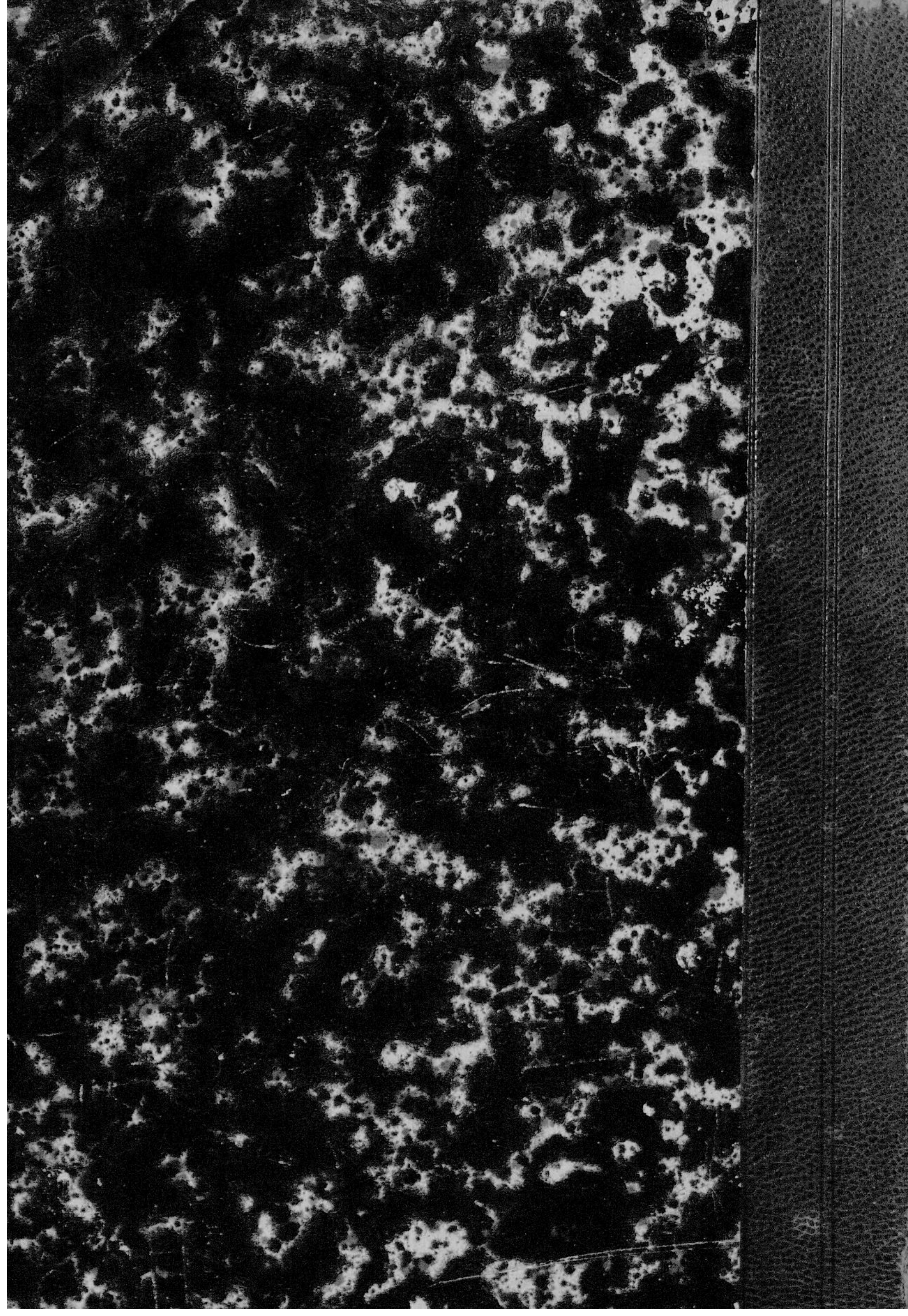
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